

# META

> GAME ON : VER 1.0\_



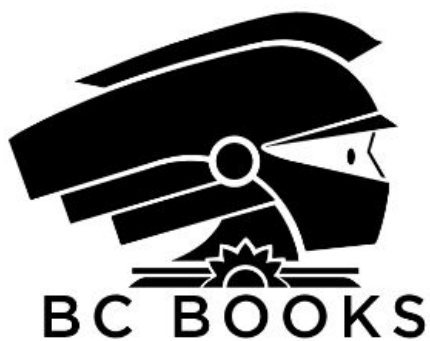
XANDER BLACK



**META**

GAME ON : VER 1.0

Xander Black



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ISBN: 9798411379891

*For Hesper, Sarah, and Hattie, who guided me through  
dark chapters.*

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***Special thanks*** to Jason Haines, Alan Curson, Clint Cure, Jason Elder, Russell Martin, Brendan Tansey, Susi Rajah and Vivi Rajah for taking the time to read my drafts. Tom Witcomb for his feedback, edits and insightful industry advice, Rachel Black for her terrific design, Hesper Kelso-Black for her pixel art inspiration, Revangale for his art, Alison and Martin for their encouragement at the journey's beginning





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## PROLOGUE

**In the expansive** realms of Brith, the eternal war between good and evil continued at a modest pace. In truth, statements like this were a bit of an exaggeration. It'd been about a decade. It was also difficult to describe many of the inhabitants of Brith as exclusively good or evil. There were a few who you might call "mostly good" and many more you could label "downright nasty". One such encounter between a "mostly good" individual and one of the "downright nasty" variety was occurring at this very moment, in a fortress on the northernmost tip of the Kingdom of Orsus.

Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, Knight of the Golden Order, stood staring down the most dangerous foe he'd ever faced – the arch-wizard, Nazgan. More powerful than the dreaded White Wyrms of the Icy Reach. More cunning than the Warrior Lycans of the Forest of Shadows. Haughtier than the infamous folk band, the Bards of Aerynhall. He could almost taste victory. At least it was how he imagined victory might taste. It could have been the fruit muffins he'd received as reward from the bakery in Roh where his quest had started. Nevertheless, it was sweet, comforting, and loitered in the back of his mind, mingling with thoughts of treasure and, above all, a boost in the rankings.

Nazgan glowered at his opponent with the sort of cold-blooded stare you might expect from the "downright nasty" sort. A gnarled finger pointed towards the knight, his hands humming with magical energy.

"You have done well to defeat my underlings, but your quest ends here, knight," sneered the wizard, his voice echoing around the grey stoned chamber. Black robes fluttered about him, their silver lining flashed when they caught the moonlight. His hawkish nose crinkled as his lips curled in contempt. He certainly looked the part of an arch-nemesis.

"Killed by a walking cliché such as you? Over my dead body!" returned Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang . He was amongst the Golden Order's best and bravest. Like most knights of his particular faction, there was no gold to be found on his armour. This often prompted a lot of questions and unnecessary conversation. Most expected a few frilly gold trimmings at the very least.

"Yes, that's the general idea."

"Good sir..." began Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, "Threats from a grown man wearing a nightgown simply aren't very convincing." Wang spoke with the confidence of a veteran of many such battles. Plus, he had one last trick up his sleeve that would help ensure victory, a little something from a time now forgotten.

The wizard snorted with more than the appropriate amount of derision.

"I will enjoy killing you. And when I'm done your body will be put on display — impaled upon the highest tower as a warning to all who would challenge me," he hissed.

Wang responded, "And after this is over, I shall enjoy impaling your mum with my mighty sword, Jaxinator." He whirled his blade in an elegant display of skill, "and this..." he paused for dramatic effect, "... isn't Jaxinator."

The wizard halted, disturbed in a manner unbecoming of his villainous nature. The hard lines of malice made an attempt to abandon his face whilst he stuttered, "M...my mother?"

"I found her dancing around a pole at Boltac's tavern and she gladly obliged to do a little dance around mine. Lovely, accommodating lady."

"What?!?"

"No need to get upset, I didn't "sheathe the sword" so to speak, it was only a bit of a polish."

"WHAT?!?"

"I don't go dipping on a first date. What kind of man do you think I am?"

"YOU WILL BURN YOU, SCU-"

In a blinding motion, Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang lunged forward burying his blade deep in the chest of Nazgan, whose rage filled eyes widened.

"For you, I'll make an exception. Consider yourself Wanged."

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *It appears certain players are using an exploit that gives them a sizeable combat advantage against our COGs. By making reference to the "Mums" of AIs (as was a popular pastime in the early days of "online gaming"), it engages our empathetic "caring" subroutines leaving the AIs confused and vulnerable to surprise attacks. Whilst these routines serve well when players are interacting peacefully with non-combative COGs, we will need to disengage these processes when hostility levels surpass 3 and remove them altogether for certain key characters with the next update.*

*Live to play!*

**The year 2064** did not turn out as many had predicted. We weren't on the verge of an environmental disaster, there were no warring nations fighting over scarce natural resources as many economists had hypothesised, nor were there any post-apocalyptic mutants rampaging through abandoned streets. There was, however, no doubt that the streets were abandoned, and there was occasional suggestion that a few post-apocalyptic mutants might liven things up a bit.

Limitless clean energy combined with artificial intelligence-based automation had ensured there was plenty of everything to go around for Earth's shrinking population. Universal Basic Income provided more than enough for every individual to have a comfortable, if not extravagant lifestyle and even housing was affordable provided you were willing to live outside the metropolitan areas, which these days, just about everyone was willing to do.

Fifty years ago, the streets of major cities like London and New York were alive with activity, teeming with people busying themselves with one task or another. They worked very long hours in jobs they didn't much like, often with other people whom they didn't like either.

The motivations for this varied from person to person. Some did it for basic survival, others to accumulate status and wealth, and a few even thought it would increase their chances of attracting a mate. But whatever their reason, most felt that their careers gave them purpose, and in many ways, defined their identities. This type of thinking had been ongoing for a very long time, centuries, millennia, and kept society ticking forward. It had been shattered in the space of a single generation. With automated systems in place to provide for everyone, the younger generation had turned to other means for a fulfilling life. Whilst many still pursued productive activities they enjoyed, the general consensus amongst most towards working for a living was "bugger that."

In the early 2040s, the extremely contagious pandemic ASTROVID-42 had forced many into their homes for six months. People shopped, worked, went to school and socialised from home. What

was a little surprising is that after the crisis had passed no one really wanted to come out. There was of course one other factor: Cyberspace.

Thanks to the creation of the cybernet, which now connected 97% of the world's population, almost everything could be done without leaving home. It was not only how people went about the more mundane aspects of life, but it provided an opportunity for people to explore new vistas of reality made only possible by Cyberspace. Anything and everything was on the cybernet. Whatever your special interest, be it retro, speculative, obscure or perverse – or all four — the cybernet had a place for you. This meant you could indulge in your favourite activities as you pleased, which left everyone feeling much happier about their lives. Especially the perverts.

The world's best and most popular virtual destination was Brith, as featured in the game *Neverborn* created by Arctik Studios in 2054. *Neverborn* was the first fully immersive massive multiplayer role-playing game to take advantage of Virtech®'s third generation of neural helmets. Now with over 200 million players, the lands of Brith were so wealthy that it was often said that Arctik CEO, Henry Spinks, should have attended the recent G20 summit.

Indeed, the virtual economy of *Neverborn* dwarfed that of many countries, and Arctik contributed more in aid packages to developing economies than many nations. Gifts of both funds and technology had single-handedly transformed the poverty-stricken island nation of Tuvalu into a thriving cybermarket. This led to the common saying in Tuvaluan, "*Faia auro mai mafauauga*," meaning: "To make gold from imagination." The Tuvaluans did so well trading in cybergoods, that the saying rapidly altered to "*Faia ni tupe mai i'u*" meaning: "To make money from morons."

Brith's economy flourished as many players found their niche making a substantial living from the game. Arctik's slogan, "Live to Play", had been reversed by this group of cyberentrepreneurs and the hashtag #PlaytoLive was seen as often as its official counterpart. Ferbert\_the\_Invincible, as his name implied, truly was invincible. He



topped the global league tables and his cybercasts were watched by millions around the world. His legend grew even more for the mystery surrounding his true identity, which remained the topic of intense forum speculation with theories including comedian Ferbert Banks, Arctic CEO Henry Spinks and centenarian actor, Kevin Bacon.

Many had tried to replicate Ferbert's achievements with varying degrees of success. The top players (or Meta players as they were often called) had large audiences, and many made good livings, earning ad revenue from cybercasts and corporate sponsorship. Many less successful players achieved some notoriety by having a particular gimmick or making their game sessions as entertaining as possible in the hope of gaining an audience. It is with one such individual, who tried very hard to be "mostly good" and a little entertaining, that our story begins.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** Cola® is now available as both potions and in taverns — consuming these will provide an energy boost to characters. Our engineers have worked hard, to get the flavour just right and whilst many have said, "you can't beat the real thing", our synthesised taste now has full approval from our now largest corporate sponsor. So, to "Make it Real" we're giving all employees a free bottle of Cola®. Enjoy.

*Live to play!*



# CHAPTER 1

## THE MEETING

**As with all** good fantasy yarns, our story begins in a pub. Amongst the smoky haze and shifty characters, a lone, armoured warrior sat at a small table in the corner. His short cropped dark hair and altogether pleasing features made him unremarkable amongst the many beautiful faces in Brith. Today he was even more inconspicuous, sitting head down whilst fidgeting with table cutlery. A mug of freshly poured and barely touched Cola® had been plonked in front of him by a buxom barmaid with highly improbable proportions. She had the sort of beauty that would turn heads, which was precisely what she was designed to do. But this particular patron could only muster a quiet "thanks," as the barmaid flounced away through the crowds.

The warrior's name both in and out of game was Cyrus, which made things easy to remember. He sipped the brown liquid in front of him curiously and winced, "Too sweet," he mumbled, and went back to his preferred activity of watching the door. Cyrus had been watching it now for fifteen minutes. He was meeting his old friend, James Everett, who was thirty minutes late. Everett was never on time, always making one excuse or another, but he was generally a reliable person, and the two had forged a friendship of trust through shared adventure and adversity, despite never having met in real life.

The door swung wide and a shadowy, cloaked figure pushed his way through the crowds to seat himself beside Cyrus. The man threw back his cowl to reveal immaculately styled hair and a finely waxed, javelin-like moustache. His eyes were a little too large for his thin face, and his ears drew unnecessary attention to themselves by protruding at just the wrong angle. He was one of the few

cyberdenizens who had chosen an imperfect avatar, a rare individual amongst the many flawless faces in Brith.

Everett worked at his local barbers in his small town in Wisconsin. In the Cyberage, barber shops were one of the few bricks and mortar establishments to not just survive but thrive with the trendy elite sporting unique cuts and styling. It was a rare non-necessity that people still desired, and had become a rather prestigious career path. Of course, any employment was rare and highly competitive but Everett often boasted that it was his Masters of Architecture, which had won him the role, "It's all about form and aesthetics," he once said, "the job's still the same, it just gets a little hairier than building design."

"Sorry I'm late," said Everett, panting, "...it was a totally jacked day at work. Some big news." He spoke with the sort of accent that indicated a well-to-do upbringing, but liked to throw in defunct terms from the last century. All the cyberbeatniks did it.

"Never mind." Cyrus voice was subdued and there was something in his eyes that looked permanently defeated, "It's probably too late to investigate the catacombs now, though. We'll get eaten alive if night falls whilst we're down there." This wasn't a figure of speech.

"Is that Cola®?" asked Everett eagerly, noticing the large mug of brown liquid on the table, "I just got my promo potion." He fumbled to remove a heavily branded red and white vial from his belt.

"It's a bit sweet," replied Cyrus, unable to muster much enthusiasm, "They can never get the taste right. It's not bad, but not what you'd expect."

Cola® had been slow to move into the cybermarket, having learned from the mistakes of other food and drink makers. Most notable amongst them was Fish Fries®. They made the unfortunate mistake of promoting their product during a period when olfactory senses were very much in beta phase. It would become known as the biggest marketing disaster in cyberspace history. The smell was eerily comparable to an Icelandic delicacy known as hárkarl, which is

created by burying a dead shark in sand for a few months and then cutting it into strips to be dried for several more. Fish Fries® achieved notoriety by becoming an actual measurement for bad odours in VR. Sales plummeted everywhere but Iceland, where they gained a strong following.

“Mind if I have a sip?” asked Everett. He held the mug up and swirled it around like a wine connoisseur before inhaling a mouthful, “Yes, it’s a little off, a bit too sweet and a strange cinnamon kind of flavour. It’s poppin’ though,” he concluded, “I’ll order my own.” He leaned in and whispered to Cyrus “You know, I’ve had a chance to test the beta release of the next generation Virtech® helm. The taste is the bomb.”

Taste and smell were the source of most criticism surrounding the Virtech® 4. Virtech®'s original VR helmets had been considered a stunning breakthrough, the result of world class neuroscientists working in conjunction with engineers for eight years. The end product was a lightweight helmet that broadcast sensory information directly to the cerebral cortex. Sound and vision were easily mastered, but it was years before touch was implemented successfully in the second generation. This led to the era now commonly referred to as the *Big CyberBang*. The rise of life-like sexual experiences in VR became very big business, and unsurprisingly saw a massive upswing in celibacy and divorce rates in the real world. With the added tactile realism of the Virtech® 3, which came just a few years later, the world saw cybersex addiction rise to epidemic levels, and negative population growth rates for the first time on record.

Virtech® had promised its next gen, the Pentricle, would be an epicure's delight.

Everett unsheathed his new blade and lay it on the table with a thud, “Look at this bad boy,” his declaration causing a few bar patrons to glance over, semi-interested.

"Is that real? How much was it?" asked Cyrus. A signature Jackbanan Vampiric Sword pulsed quietly on the counter.

"It can't be genuine, can it? This is just another one of your tricks," Cyrus decided cynically, but continued his examination with wide eyes "... is it a Tuvaluan knock off? What exactly does it do, anyway?"

"It's totally dope, it absorbs the properties of things it touches. I sit it in a fire, and the blade catches alight, or if I kill a snake, it starts dripping venom. Nice, eh?"

"I got it from Jack himself," Everett continued proudly, "It's a long story, but there's more I need to tell you..." he said, hastily putting the blade away, "... I need a drink first." He waved to get the attention of the barmaid, and instantly went slack jawed as she approached.

"What will it be, lads?" she asked, busily retying her apron.

"I... eeerrr... we...."

"He'll have a Cola®." interjected Cyrus.

The maid nodded and moved off through the crowd. Everett's gaze bobbed in unison as she meandered this way and that towards the bar.

"They don't make them like that where I'm from," breathed Everett.

"They don't make them like that anywhere," replied Cyrus, "this is fantasy. Besides, you're not going to get anywhere with her, I've seen a dozen players completely fail in the last ten minutes."

Everett suddenly regained focus and turned back to Cyrus.

"There's something I need to tell you. I lost my job today. Replaced by an AI," began Everett.

"At the barbers?"

"No, not at the barbers... did you actually believe that?"

“Why wouldn’t I? I thought that ridiculous moustache was some artifact of your profession.”

“Well, I couldn’t say where I worked, I was contractually bound. I had to tell you something. Wasn’t it a bit whack that I don’t have an American accent when I said I lived in Wisconsin?” Everett continued, smoothing his moustache.

“I thought you were putting on an English accent, trying to get into the medieval spirit of things. You were doing the whole upper class English twat thing surprisingly well. So where did you work?”

Everett mumbled an inaudible response.

“What?”

He mumbled it again a little louder.

“You worked in your attic? You’re really going to have to speak up.”

“I WORKED AT ARCTIK STUDIOS. And I lost my job today to a BLOODY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE!”

A few bar patrons turned and gave the two a studious look, but soon resumed their previous activities.

“No need to shout,” said Cyrus gesturing downward with his hands, “Can you prove it?”

“Prove it?”

“Yes. Tell me something that only an employee would know.”

Everett thought for a moment, “There’s a Meta artifact at Kyburn Falls.”

“What?”

“You heard me. There’s a Meta quest item at Kyburn Falls.”

“I can’t verify that, can I?”

“Well... okay then... you remember that time we took that expedition to the Barrier Mountains? And it was full of good vibes, and you got lucky at the end with that girl with the long braids?”



“Well, yes, I’m not about to forget that.”

“Now, that required some insider knowledge. You still owe me for that.”

The entire mission had been extraordinarily easy, now that Cyrus thought about it. Others had reported it being one of their most challenging journeys.

“That was my adventure. I helped create it. Think about it for a second, we took the optimum route, I even knew about that hidden room where you got that dagger, and I told you that girl would be impressed if you rescued her wolf.”

Cyrus took a moment to process this before deciding it was not just plausible but likely. He didn’t get lucky often, even with COGs designed specifically for that purpose.

“Well assuming this is true, what exactly did you do at Arctik?”

“I designed buildings. I have a master’s in architecture. I did all sorts, but dungeons and castles were my bread and butter. I won an award for the Tower of Horrors you know.”

“So why are you telling me this now and not before?”

“I wasn’t allowed to talk about it in game. But I’m a free agent now, I don’t have to move to their tune anymore. I can say whatever I want... and...” He put a finger to his nose as he leaned in and whispered, “I still have a bit of useful information.”

“You know what’s in the new release?” asked Cyrus, sitting forward.

“Well, we were never told the big picture stuff, there’s only a handful of people who have that sort of oversight. But we knew a big storyline was soft launching, the final phase of the world! I happen to have designed the tomb at Kyburn Falls where a pivotal clue can be found and I know exactly where it is. Pretty jazzy, eh?”

The global narrative of Brith was commonly referred to as the Meta game. This was usually only pursued by Meta players of the highest calibre. No one but the most competitive, most time-invested and

tactically-minded could hope to unravel the storyline of Brith as it emerged. Most players like Cyrus tended to potter around, enjoying the general experience without making much of an impression in the overall scheme of things. An opportunity to be a part of important unfolding events was rare indeed.

The barmaid placed a fresh cola in front of Everett, who took the opportunity to make a rather clumsy move, even by game designer standards.

“Hey foxy, has anyone told you you’re virtually perfect?” he said with a raised eyebrow that may have appeared suave on a more handsome face, “If you’re free tonight, we could book it out of here. I’d love to get a bit closer to those... polygons...” the last part of the sentence trailed off as she disappeared without so much as a glance, “Become a game designer’ they said. ‘They’re the rockstars of the cyberage’ they said...”

“There are far better places than Brith for that sort of thing.” said Cyrus distractedly, “Drink up,” he continued. It seemed for a moment the defeated look had been replaced by a firm lipped resolve, “We’re going tomb raiding.”

The look of determination was a rare fleeting moment for Cyrus. When not being Cyrus the warrior, Cyrus was being Cyrus the failed physicist. He had spent much of the last five years in Cyberspace and not entirely by choice.

Cyrus had almost completed his PhD on time-displaced quantum entanglement at Cambridge. He enjoyed research, and it had long been a dream to equal his father’s academic achievements. Despite his failure to finish his paper, it was still one of the first things he’d mention upon meeting someone. His crowning achievement in what had been an otherwise unremarkable life.

His enthusiasm vanished, however, when explaining why he never completed his research. He’d make a few glib noises about gaming being his true calling, but the truth was Cyrus had been taken ill. He’d developed a rare neurological disorder — so rare, in fact, it

didn't even have a proper medical name. It was classed as a form of dysesthesia, which rendered sufferers vulnerable to phantom pains. His case was so severe that he'd often describe it as "his entire nervous system being bathed in acid". The more he would try to concentrate, the worse it would get, to the point where simply existing was an unbearable experience. He finally found solace in the Virtech® helms, which seemed to eliminate most of the problem. The sensory rerouting mostly disconnected him from his nervous system, with only low-level pain at worst, and a blissful feeling of near normality at best.

Upon Cyrus' insistence, the two left the tavern before dusk. It was safer to travel the roads during the day and it also gave them an opportunity to take in the countryside.

The veritable army of game designers behind *Neverborn* had laboured many hours to make the lands wondrously beautiful. Rolling green hills met fields of exotic flowers. Mushrooms the size of oak trees dotted the landscape, as did many other interesting and unique flora. Colourful and benign insects went about their business, some leaving glistening trails of dust as they flew. Majestic stags and other fauna, a few of the more fantastic variety, grazed freely in the fields. But even these marvels paled in comparison to the sunsets. Every sunset in Brith was utterly breathtaking. Some players were so taken with the grandeur of the landscape that they fell into a deep depression when forced to confront their mundane everyday lives, "Sunset Syndrome", as it was called, was now a known medical condition that had entered common vernacular. Unfortunately, the easiest and most affordable treatment for many was to spend more time in game.

Cyrus and Everett were enjoying an especially picturesque sunset this evening. Their silhouetted figures moved against a blazing orange sky. It was an image worthy of National Geographic, but it wasn't the brilliant scenery that had Cyrus enthused. Everett's insider tip was the most exciting opportunity he'd had in a long time.

His efforts to get back on his feet were finally being rewarded, it seemed.

"Sometimes it feels like karma's real, like we're being looked after, somehow," Cyrus sighed more to himself than Everett.

"Karma? What are you on about?"

"Well, I just mean it feels like life isn't just random events, that things could work out... if you know what I mean."

"Oh," said Everett caught off guard. It wasn't like Cyrus to stray into esoteric musings, "I thought you were talking about *game karma*."

"Is *game karma* even real?" asked Cyrus, with sudden interest in his eyes.

"Well, it's funny you should ask, not my field but I did know the girl in the gameplay department who was responsible for that particular area. Claudia Jensen. She was totally out there. Strong believer that good deeds should always harvest rewards. One of those people who'd always go out of their way to help you. Hard worker, smart too. She wanted Brith to be a reflection of how the world should be."

"So, it's real then?" Cyrus asked again.

"More or less, although I don't know exactly how it works," confirmed Everett.

"And your friend is still heading up that area?"

"Oh no, Claudia got fired. From what I gather, her manager felt threatened by the amount of attention her game improvements received. He was a real turkey... got rid of her at the first opportunity."

"Well, so much for karma," mumbled Cyrus. A sense of dread crept into his newfound optimism.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** As many of you know, the "Virtech Pentricle® — at the heart of your cyberworld" will be released next year. In the lead up a fresh set of new adventures has been launched for our players. Our testing of Virtech®'s new features makes us confident we will soon have all the tools required to conclude the Neverborn global storyline as envisioned by our founder — Henry Spinks. In anticipation, the prophecy of the Neverborn will start to propagate through the realms of Brith. Already our new Orders of Knighthood, the Dark Flame and the Seraphim, are laying the foundations for the final CHAPTER of Brith. A new era of discovery is open to all players in Neverborn V1.45.

*Live to play!*



## CHAPTER 2

### CRUSADERS OF THE DARK FLAME

**It was quite** a feat, even for Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, to decapitate three knights with a single sword stroke. He made a mental note to review a replay of the move later.

“.... eight... nine... and ten. Is that all of them?” asked Wang, placing the bodies in a row by the muddy roadside. He liked round numbers. His companion nodded and gestured to the line-up, “You were supposed to keep one alive for questioning.”

Wang’s associate, Vanja, was a sight to behold, the sort of picturesque angular blonde you’d see on the pages of haute couture magazines fifty years ago. People valued beauty a lot more before VR made it accessible to everyone. But unlike the overpaid models of the last century, Vanja was no frail flower. Five of the black clad knights had been felled by her arrows. She was a Meta player of the highest order.

“I have to say, there was something a little odd about this lot,” said Wang, “Didn’t you get that impression?”

“They’re Crusaders of the Dark Flame. They’ve attacked villagers, butchered children, and believe that the return of some unstoppable demonic being is imminent. They want to burn the whole world to the ground.”

“Yes, I think that could be it,” Wang said, now having arranged the bodies from tallest to shortest. He’d placed the three headless ones at the short end. It suddenly occurred to him that their placement would be different with heads in situ, which caused him an undue amount of sudden irritation.

Vanja walked to the end of Wang's line-up. The tallest one appeared to be the leader. She knelt and began unbuckling his belt.

"Really? Is that necessary?" Wang winced, "I know you have a thing for tall men, but didn't you get friendly with that Duke from Crad just the other day?"

"We're going to have to search them now for clues, thanks to your overzealous sword swinging," Vanja replied whilst sifting through papers she'd removed from the knight's belt pouch. The two had forged a strong partnership, with Vanja the brains and Wang the brawn. Together they'd shot through the ranks and were now both positioned firmly in the Global 200. It was an unusual partnership — the two were not very much alike, but there was an uncanny coordination between the two that underpinned much of their success.

"Here it is," she said holding out a map, "It pinpoints the exact location near Kyburn Falls. This will save a lot of time."

"Fascinating," replied Wang.

"Well, we were near there about a month ago..." began Vanja.

"Oh no, not that. These swords. They all have the same make of sword. I'm sure they're enchanted too, but whatever they do, I can't get it to work." Wang pondered as he cut through the air with ease, a black blade in each hand. He placed them neatly on the chests of the fallen knights and turned to Vanja, "I once found an enchanted amulet and wasted hours trying to activate its powers. In the end I got so damn annoyed that I hurled it against a giant rock and it exploded. Ka-blam! Just like that," dramatized Wang, spreading out his fingers to indicate the effect of the blast.

"Interesting," replied Vanja dryly, wondering what exactly the point of that anecdote was, "If you're finished..."

"Not quite yet," interrupted Wang who was busily engraving his emblem on the tallest knight's armour with the point of his sword.

"Must you?" Vanja sighed.



Wang looked at his handy work and tilted his head to the side, "Bravo," he murmured to himself. He didn't consider himself particularly artistic but his symbol was becoming known throughout the lands. Satisfied, he turned to Vanja, "To Kyburn falls, then!" he suddenly pronounced holding aloft his sword.

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Everett and Cyrus plans had been temporarily derailed. Upon reaching the city of Roh, Cyrus had decided it was best to rethink their foolhardy quest and adjourn to the Magician's Brew for a couple of ales.

"So, it was a quid pro quo deal." Everett was explaining again, "I designed his castle layout, and Jackbanan gave me the sword. He's the real deal. I'm a big fan of his work. It was an ace job too. Really funky layout and structure to his fortress. Not like some of the work I got from Arctik... like this tomb we're off to... 'Design a room.' That was the brief, if you can believe it."

"Speaking of this tomb," Cyrus inquired, "What actually is the plan here? Do we just go in, get the item and leave?" He had been too caught up in the opportunity to actually ask any important questions the first time around.

"Well, 'yes' and 'no'. There may be a snag or two."

"What kind of snag?"

"A guardian maybe?" Everett was trying hard not to meet Cyrus' gaze.

"Guardian? Like a troll or ogre? I hope not, you know the smell makes me ill."

"Not exactly... look, I did manage to put in a hidden back entrance, which no one seemed to notice. I wasn't responsible for whatever's in the room, but... it could be a meta monster," Everett replied a little

guiltily.

“Meta monster? Like a dragon? At what point did you think it would be a good idea to share that minor detail?”

The most powerful of monsters in Brith were generally avoided at all costs, even by Meta players. Dragons were a classic example, but they weren't, by any means, the most dangerous foe you could encounter. The most formidable adversary yet found in Brith was the Lich King, Werdna, an arch-mage from the second age, who had prolonged his existence in an undead state through necromancy. On his blog, former number six ranked player, Sir\_Dance-a-lot, one of two survivors in a group of seven Metas who undertook to slay the creature, wrote:

“Werdna packed a hell of a lot of fire power. It was like battling a nuclear warship. Meteors and lightning bolts were hurled at us from afar, as he summoned demons from the underworld to carry out his bidding. Each demon was easily a Meta level encounter, and they just kept on coming. It took a highly coordinated effort, and the sacrifice of several comrades, to get close enough to finally finish him.

Afterwards, it felt like we'd been in a warzone. It was a level of trauma I never thought possible in cyberspace. We saved a city and its population from virtual death, and the financial rewards were substantial — enough to retire on. The only other survivor, the wizard, Sherock, did precisely that. As for me, I've decided to quit adventuring and open a virtual dance school in the Twin Cities. They say you can't dance away the fear, but I'm going to do my best.” Sir\_Dance-a-lot left the Meta game and became the head choreographer for the Orsian Royal Dance Troupe, a role he still performs to this day.

“Well, it's not a dragon, the rooms not big enough. There was a lot of attention being paid to an iron statue and the design of it... I was keen to do it myself, but they got some guy whose folio was jacked with automatons to create it in the end.” Everett explained.

“An iron construct, like a war golem?” Cyrus asked.

“Uh no, I think this was probably a bit more unique than that.” Everett said, his voice betraying a certain pride.

“Okay, so you’re saying that we’re going to get attacked by something maybe more powerful than a war golem? A war golem alone could probably kill us a hundred times over before we put so much as a dent in it. Do you not see this as a problem?”

“Hey, chill. I was going to say something, but you were very set on getting there.”

“That’s when I thought we had a chance. You neglected to mention the iron death machine that turns us to jerky.”

At this point a passing bard, sensing the cloud hanging over the conversation gingerly approached them intending to lift their spirits with a song. He began with a plucky, gentle riff on his mandolin. It was a folk variation of *Stairway to Heaven*, which always seemed popular with the Brith crowd. The song started to build, much to the annoyance of Cyrus who was already having trouble concentrating.

“You know, that’s really not helping,” said Cyrus as the bard approached, “Is there any way around this thing?”

“Stealth. Sneak in and out through a back tunnel, without it even noticing. I did design the space after all. The team didn’t even know there was a back entrance, I think we have a solid shot at this.”

Cyrus’s frustration with the situation was bubbling to the surface. A burning sensation along his back was intensifying as was often the case when he got into a state.

“Sneak? You might be able to do that, but I’m no burglar. How do you expect me to sneak around in this clanking armour?”

“You could change?”

“Well I’m going to need a change of undergarments the moment that Meta-thing comes lumbering at us,” replied Cyrus, exasperated. A

dark shadow grew in his mind blotting out any fleeting hopes at the Meta.

The bard was now in free flow, playing a screeching solo when Cyrus rounded on him, "You're not getting any coin from us!" he snapped, "Bugger off or you'll buy yourself a very fast stairway to heaven." He turned to Everett with frustration clouding his eyes, declaring sharply, "Let's just forget this escapade for now. I need another drink."

**Arctik Studios Memo:** As you're aware, a number of cults have formed organically within the realms of Brith. It is now our official stance not to interfere with any religious group unless it poses a threat to the global narrative. Our latest marketing tagline "Visit Brith, it may change your outlook." is even meant to encourage philosophical and religious diversity.

Some of you are aware that a certain legacy tech company is pursuing legal action claiming we are subtly attempting to move users away from their email client. We will offer an update on the status of this as it becomes available.

Live to play!



## CHAPTER 3

### VIRTUALISM

**The cyberage** was one of atheism and isolationism. It was unsurprising that over the years, as people looked for meaning in their lives, new ideologies emerged. It seemed that it was part of the human condition to cling to one belief system or another. By far the most popular of the growing religious groups was "Virtualism," or those who believed in the "Great Game": the term used to describe reality itself.

Physics had long ago established that reality simply didn't exist at a quantum level until it was observed and measured. To some, this reflected the conservation of resources as seen in the way virtual spaces were rendered. However, it was only when Cyberspace achieved a high level of realism that physicists were able to draw strong parallels between the actual universe and the most efficient algorithms used to render virtual spaces. There were, in fact, some equations first developed and used to describe cyberreality that were now used to describe our own. Cyberengines would switch between generalist equations to render VR and more precise, detailed equations when cyberspace was observed closely. This mimicked many of the observations of quantum mechanics perfectly. The parallels were so astounding that many believed that our universe was, in fact, a simulation created by a higher consciousness. In this hypothesis, the creators of our universe, or "reality engineers" as they were often called, were effectively "Gods" and the world's populace were seen as players.

The religion was established by the young prophet, Edmund Blessed, who founded the church in 2050. Blessed offered not just pseudo-mystical ways of reaching out to the "reality engineers" but a practical code of conduct to get you through the "Great Game." The

idea germinated quickly, and the world now had millions of Virtualist devotees. The theory that reality itself was a simulated space led many practitioners to embrace an existential attitude towards VR. It didn't seem to matter which simulation you decided to live your life to the full in, so it was paramount that the individual chose the existence that gave them the most personal satisfaction. For many Virtualists, this meant journeying the realms of Brith.

There was a senior assembly of Virtualists at the Magician's Brew that evening and Cyrus had accidentally found himself getting into a bit of a philosophical argument.

"That's absolute nonsense!" declared Cyrus to one of the five Virtualists that had pushed their way onto his and Everett's table.

"I'll have you know I was researching for a PhD in physics at Cambridge and there is no way we could be living in a simulation. This may seem real to you, but if I had a microscope in here, we wouldn't be seeing atomic particles in action. It's impossible for any system to track that much detail, even with the Quantum Unified Integrated Super Computer. VR wasn't capable of simulating the sort of experiments I was involved in. It has many limitations."

"That's assuming that base reality is the same as our reality. Its highly possible base reality is far more sophisticated and nothing like our reality at all. A construct designed to simulate our existence could be child's play for the *Reality Engineers* under the laws of their universe," replied one Virtualist, who happened to be a gnome. He stroked his long beard as he spoke.

"And you're also assuming that we can't progress beyond our current technological limitations. That's a flawed assumption to begin with. Computers will come in the future that make your QUISC look like a digital watch," said a ridiculously beautiful raven-haired elf, "Not to mention a computer only needs to create and keep track of the atomic particles you're observing, not every atom in the room," chimed in a third Virtualist wearing a triangular medallion, which identified her as a Sorceress of the Seven Stones.



Cyrus sighed. The arguments were impossible to refute but were only conjecture with no evidence behind them. Just like every other religion, “And why exactly would these *Reality Engineers* create a simplistic universe like ours if their reality was so much more vastly complex and interesting?”

“Ah well, that’s one of the questions that Edmund Blessed himself has put thought into and answered.”

*Oh, here we go*, thought Cyrus and gave Everett a disdainful look. Everett had been keen to share the table for the number of unaccompanied girls.

“The *Reality Engineers* live in a universe far more complex than ours. But their reality is Newtonian in nature. Meaning every cause has an effect...”

“Yes, I know what Newtonian means,” interrupted Cyrus, annoyed at the condescension. He was a theoretical physicist, after all.

“So, their base reality is essentially preordained from the start. There is no free will,” the sorceress continued unfazed, “The only way they can entertain themselves is to create an artificial construct outside their reality. One with a different set of laws governing it with true randomization and freedom.”

“Either that or we’re just AIs of no consequence in some experimental simulation,” the cute elf girl added, much to the annoyance of the others. This was clearly not the agreed upon consensus.

Cyrus slumped his head into his hands, defeated. The complexity of the delusion was more than he had bargained for. He was about to ask what made them think they had freedom of choice on either a neurological or physical level, but bit his tongue knowing they wouldn’t listen.

“You know...” Cyrus began, using all his resources to come up with a different tack. The effort flickered across his face like a kind of intellectual constipation. Virtualism was impossible to prove or

disprove, but it had all the hallmarks of a money-making cult. The strain finally left as his thoughts gave birth to words, "...I need another ale," he sighed and promptly got up and picked his way through Virtualists towards the bar.

The tavern was one of the largest in Brith. Wood-framed, clusters of tables were situated throughout. The lanterns that sat on the tables bathed the floor in patchy, warm light. Cyrus was returning with drinks when the tavern suddenly exploded with cheers and applause.

Cyrus turned to see a man walk in wearing white and black hooded clergy robes with decorative silver runes sewed along the trimming. An iconic old style game pad with directional buttons shimmered in silver on his chest. He waved his arms at his side, as if to encourage the crowd, "Who's that?" Cyrus whispered to Everett.

"I think that's Edmund Blessed. I've seen his avatar before."

When the applause finally died down, the man removed his hood to reveal long flowing locks of hair. He took the centre of the floor as the crowd waited expectantly. When the room had settled, he spoke, "I welcome you all, my children." He gazed around the room, lingering a bit too long on some of the more attractive girls in the audience, "We are as one in our hearts and minds. This realm we journey, this land called Brith, is every bit as much our reality as reality itself. After all, what is really real?"

Edmund tilted his head downwards as he spoke, eyes darting left to right to check for the appropriate reaction. Seeing nods and agreeable mutters, he continued.

"It is in these artificial fleshy structures" he said, gesturing to his own body, "that our consciousness exists, and in consciousness we find our truth, not in the world that surrounds us. For consciousness is the one constant of our existence. The conscious mind does not require wealth, achievement, pleasure, or power to be happy. The illusion of these things is sufficient for many amongst us. But within each and every one of us are dreams unrealised."

“True happiness is born of the consciousness itself,” he raised his voice, “Our vessels are not so empty on the inside that we require constant stimulation on the outside. We are not such hollow shells. The true meaning to our existence resides within us all.”

“Do not look for patterns in our reality, nor pre-ordained destiny guiding our future, these things too are illusions of the mind. Tie your hopes to a perceived thread of fate and your world unravels. The “Great Game” is immense. Too vast and complex for the human mind to grasp. It’s not there to test us, it is not there to help us. The Great Game simply *is*. Each and every one of you has your own story, but, for the first time since time began, we can choose where the story is played. Choose wisely, and choose what is right for you. Your worlds are your own.” He projected the last line particularly loudly, like an over-trained Shakespearean actor, to much applause from his audience.

“What a strange religion,” Cyrus whispered, “It’s like he’s readily admitting there’s no meaning to anything, that it’s all just a pointless game. Isn’t the whole idea of religion meant to give people meaning and hope?”

“Well, it’s cleverer in some ways. It’s like, way harder to disprove than some religions,” Everett paused to take a big gulp of ale, “You know what he said about patterns in reality. That’s a lot of the attraction to worlds like this one according to Arctik’s research on cyberaddiction. You *can* see some of the patterns in a game like this, and that gives you control. Every effort here has its rewards... that’s not the case in reality, you know,” replied Everett, “...well not often at any rate.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cyrus.

“In a game like this, you go ahead and do what you do. You skewer a dragon and get a trove of treasure. It’s controllable and actions lead to rewards. In *reality*, you’re really good at what you do. You win awards for your work. Then some jacked up AI has learned everything you do and can do it better and faster than you, so you

lose your job. That's reality. You write your novel and no one reads it. You compose a musical masterpiece and the public are too uninformed to even understand why it's so good. There is no correlation between effort, mastery and reward in reality. It's just a lottery. That's why people spend so much time in places like this."

It was a good observation thought Cyrus. His own experiences had taught him some harsh lessons about the randomness of reality.

The tavern crowd now began stomping their feet in unison, "Blessed, Blessed, Blessed..." they chanted, and it was obvious that Blessed was enjoying being the centre of attention, "A blessing from the Blessed one!" someone shouted.

Blessed took to the floor now, and moved between tables actually granting blessings. Not some sort of divine blessing, but rather the actual game spell "Bless" which, in addition to granting substantial game bonuses, temporarily bestowed a feeling of immense physical wellbeing and wholeness upon the recipient. Blessed had now gained an assistant carrying a donation bag in, which many of his followers threw gold pieces. Pamphlets were being distributed to tables outlining funds required to move higher in the order.

"Look at this," said Cyrus whilst scanning through a brochure, "This guy's as bad as those cyberevangelists... for ten thousand gold I can receive the entry rank of Neo-Virtualist, and I get a virtual pen with my name inscribed on it – completely transferrable between most cyberenvironments." He suddenly noticed that almost everyone around him sported a pen like the one in the literature filling him with the sort of disquiet one might get when discussing art in a room full of rugby players.

"And that's the lowest rank," Cyrus had now lowered his voice to a quiet whisper. Everett was also flicking through a brochure absorbing the content with incredulity, "It goes all the way up to 'Demi-prophet', one million BGP annually, and you get a personal channel to Edmund Blessed himself, substantial in game bonuses in Neverborn, cybermon, and 50 other popular destinations, and your own group of

a thousand followers. It's practically a franchise. And can you imagine the kind of money he's got behind him to cut those sorts of deals?"

"Donations and blessings?" said Edmund's helper approaching the table. She was an attractive, cheerful young lady with the sort of innocence that might make her vulnerable to a charismatic religious leader. Cyrus frowned, exchanging a disapproving glance with Everett, but the five Virtualists at the table were quick to throw gold into the bag, one putting in extra to receive a blessing.

"You two aren't part of my flock," stated Edmund as he walked with confident strides towards the table, "Whether you believe in Virtualism or not, the truth is within. Your world's your own. Are you here to join the Church?"

"Uh, no thanks. Sorry, but I just started following someone else... just last week actually," said Cyrus, nervously putting his pamphlet back on the pile.

"Oh? Which religion?" asked Edmund, his curiosity suddenly piqued.

"Oh, you know, it was one of those religions, where there's meaning behind everything."

"Oh yes!" Everett continued where Cyrus left off, "Definitely lots of reasons behind why everything happens in our religion. It's totally the joint! Kinda one of those pseudo-sciencey grand plan cults..."

"And do you feel fulfilled by your new religion?" asked Edmund, wearing a dubious expression.

"Oh, very fulfilled. Thanks for asking. But I'm sure our meeting still has significance. Everything has a reason, there's a kind of destiny to everything... lots of it..." Cyrus trailed off.

"Well," began Edmund, "should you find yourself dissatisfied, and should you choose to join, you'd each receive a free workshop on 'Human/COG Relationship Mastery.' It's an offer only available this week. After all, as you say, your being here is surely..." his voice

trailed off as if distracted. Cyrus and Everett followed his gaze to a rather unexpected sight.

A glowing white, translucent polygon the size of a tennis ball floated slowly through the room from the tavern door. Flecks of light orbited around it as it drifted through the air with a faint hum. The tavern went silent as its presence was noted by its patrons. It was like nothing they'd seen before. *Was this some part of the Edmund show?* It purposefully made its way to hover in front of the prophet himself.

Edmund stared at it with wonder, "...a sign..." He finally finished his train of thought and reached a hand towards it. The crystalline object floated in front of him, slowly changing shape as it spun, "It's beautiful," he said, running his fingers around the object's halo of light, "Full of sensation... and completion." Cyrus and Everett looked on with scepticism. If this was part of the floorshow, Edmund was at least a pretty solid actor, "It's wondrous," he declared, "This is a gift, a gift from the Engineers!"

Grabbing it with an outstretched hand, he lifted it above his head. The light intensified, "At last, a sign from the Engineers has reached us." He was now completely bathed in white light, "I can feel the power, the enlightenment and divine happiness of being in their presence!" he shrieked, his voice cracking in his ecstasy. The light grew so intense that the tavern patrons were forced to look away. Then, in a single blinding flash, the light was gone, along with Edmund Blessed. On the ground where he stood were black scorch marks and what was left of the strange crystal. It remained intact flickering, it's light dying.

Everett drew his sword and prodded the object. Its amorphous shape clung to his blade for a second, electrical arcs ran up the steel, then it sputtered and died, disappearing from its brief existence.

"That was weird." Cyrus said, stating the obvious.

"I've never heard of nor seen anything like that. That was totally out there," said Everett slightly dumbfounded.

For a minute, silence filled the tavern. A demi-cyberprophet who went by the name of Virgil\_Reality, suddenly stomped a foot and stood, holding his ale up high, "Our prophet, Edmund, has been taken to the realm of the engineers. We have witnessed a miracle," he proclaimed, "Your world's your own."

The crowd burst into applause, murmuring in unison, "Your world's your own," whilst not quite understanding what they had just seen. Many gibbered excitedly about what was surely a good omen. It was a surreal moment for Cyrus and Everett, made even stranger as a lone voice rose in song above the chatter. The Virtualist movement had adopted a few early 21<sup>st</sup> century songs as Hymns and one Virtualist with a particularly soulful voice thought this was an opportune moment to start a sing-a-long. The chosen tune had a haunting but reverent sound, and the tavern crowd seemed familiar enough with it to create acapella harmonies.

*You may think you've found a soul mate, but they're just another inmate, something feels forever wrong.*

Soon the entire establishment had lifted their voices in song, forming a crescendo of sound. It was quite an experience. Neither Everett nor Cyrus had spent much time around religious folk and wondered if this sort of thing was common.

*So many different worlds combine, we see a glimpse of the sublime. And so we sing our song.*

"It's a bit haunting this song, isn't it?" said Cyrus, "And a little depressing. A bit like their religion."

"This has got to be some sort of publicity stunt," frowned Everett, "I don't want to stick around for the aftermath."

With a quick nod to each other and the door, the two sculled their ales and chose that moment to make good their exit.

*And though we try to live our lives, in the end no one survives, there's nowhere we belong.*

The words of the song floated after them as they made their way into the night.





## CHAPTER 4

### BOOTH

**Dwayne Booth lived** on the Murder Mile in London. No one had actually been murdered there in decades, but the name had stuck. It was a part of the area's history. Now known as one of the few thriving cafe spots in the world where cyberdenizens would go to meet in real life, it was something of a novelty. You could murder a coffee or a meal there, but little else. The wait staff had long been replaced by serving bots, which meant there weren't even attempts to murder obnoxious customers. Generally speaking, there was very little murder going around these days.

Booth watched his news feeds with interest; the headlines were all about Edmund Blessed. The Virtualist prophet had been found dead in his home in the real world.

Booth checked in on the Virtualist community, which almost entirely focused on his ascension to a higher realm. For the witnesses at the Magician's Brew, the news of his passing only affirmed his transcendence. But whichever version of events people heard and believed, one thing was certain, Virtualism was gaining a lot of momentum. Dying was the best thing Edmund could have done to thrust his ideology into the spotlight. There were, however, a small group with a vested interest who required another explanation to the evening's events.

Booth was a private detective, and one of the best according to *The Peer Review* — an online resource that graded almost everything and everyone in the world. The market for exposing illicit cyberaffairs was ever buoyant, and Booth had recently exposed a number of high-profile cases. This had lined him up for some potentially more interesting and unique work with new clients.

The case they'd presented him concerned one Iorwerth Prosser, who appeared to have died from natural causes three weeks previous. This wasn't that unusual in itself. What was notable was that Iorwerth was a high-value target, a man who owned quite a number of cyberbordellos in the north western part of Orsus. His cyberlifestyle certainly seemed fairly consistent with the sort of profile. In fact, his last day consisted of a long brunch with friends, cybersex, a second long lunch with business associates, group cybersex, doing a little accounting and assets transferral, cybersex with his virtual accountant, meeting cyberpop star Evelyn Hansen, cybersex, and finally a trip to the Wolf's Head Tavern. It was on his way back to one of his establishments (presumably to engage in more cybersex) that he was taken with a sudden heart attack. What made the case suspicious was the corruption of all data leading up to and surrounding the moment of death, which was cause to investigate.

Booth loved a good mystery. There were no witnesses to the death in VR, and undercover questioning of those Iorwerth interacted with that day yielded little of value. Booth had almost nothing to go on so far. His phone rang, drawing his attention away from the news reports about Blessed.

"Hello, Detective Booth?"

"Speaking," he said instantly recognising the voice at the other end. It was Jarrod, his contact at Arctik Studios in charge of cybersecurity.

"Edmund Blessed died last night."

"Yes, I heard. But leaving reality was always his goal, wasn't it?"

"That may be, but it could be connected to Iorwerth Prosser," Jarrod drew an uncharacteristic deep breath which indicated to Booth the gravity of the situation.

"Exactly the same circumstances. We have to get on top of this. If word gets out that people are dying unnaturally, we'll have players leaving our reality in droves."

"I'm on it. Where was he when he 'transcended'?"

“The Magician’s Brew, I’ll send coordinates. There were apparently dozens of witnesses but the tracking data we have of the area is corrupt. We need someone to go in and speak to people, find out what they saw.”

“Old school, hey? Leave it with me.”

“Keep it quiet, we don’t want people to know there’s an investigation going on.”

“Understood.”

“I know we can count on you, Booth.”

The phone went dead. Communications with Arctik were always quick and to the point. The cyberlocation came through and the directive from his employers was clear. It was time to go undercover.

**Arctik Studios Confidential Memo:** We have three CyberDetectives at key locations around the world working on a classified matter for us. Their names and avatar details will soon follow. Please afford them every request. They are researching a potential issue, which is of grave importance and urgency to the company.

*Live to play!*



# CHAPTER 5

## THE DRUID

**Vanja and Wang** had arrived in Roh.

“We’re still a day away from Kyburn falls. This is taking far too long,” said Vanja, “We should have taken a dimension portal.”

Brith was vast and the most common way to avoid long travel was through dimensional gateways. They could take you from point A to B in a matter of minutes rather than requiring the usual hours or even days of travel. The Dimension Gate spell was available to high-level mages, or by engaging the services of one. Even then, very few chose to actually use them for several reasons:

- A) Most didn’t have access to the spell or could afford a mage’s gateway fee.
- B) The Brith countryside was awe-inspiringly beautiful to wander, filled with many idyllic picnic spots to eat lunch.
- C) The gateways were four-dimensional virtual space. Not only did many get lost and end up in the wrong spot, but the experience made many ill, making it the perfect spot to lose the lunch you’d have otherwise enjoyed at one of those picnic spots.

Entering four-dimensional cyberspace was one of the most mind-bending activities you could do in VR. In 2041, Anton Singh was studying for his PhD in theoretical physics at MIT, when it occurred to him that it was perfectly plausible to create four dimensional virtual spaces. The main hurdle, of course, was that humans weren’t equipped with the necessary sensory inputs to perceive the fourth spatial dimension in all its magnificence. This all changed with the advent of the Virtech® helms. With just a few firmware tweaks,

Anton was able to create four dimensional avatars, with three eyes, ears and additional limbs with which to observe and navigate the environment more easily. These monstrous creations were affectionately referred to as Cubinoids for their resemblance to certain artworks from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Connecting via Virtech® to a Cubinoid was a challenge for many to process. The additional sensory inputs took more than a few minutes to adjust to. Actually moving around a four-dimensional space was a mind opening experience and 4D vertigo was common. The spaces themselves were immaculately detailed and constructed. Light fall, shadows, gravity and even four-dimensional acoustics were all calculated with accuracy using Singh's carefully designed algorithms. Anton himself would go on to expand his algorithms to create both five and six dimensional spaces. In six dimensions it appeared he reached the limits of what the human mind could endure and after a mere five-minute exposure, his once brilliant mind was reduced to that of a blithering idiot. His research, however, did go on to earn him his PhD from MIT. Some would say he wasn't the first blithering idiot to achieve this.

"No, not at all. I entirely disagree," replied Wang clenching his jaw and drawing his eyebrows together, "We're already days ahead of anyone else and I'll not enter another one of those blasted things as long as I live, so help me. I love this town, I think it's my favourite destination in all of Brith," he said, hoping a quick change of subject would discourage further conversation. They rode without incident through the city gates.

The port city was a colourful cultural centre and the second most important populated area in the southern kingdom of Orsus behind the Twin Cities. Brith history placed it as formerly the greatest city on the continent, but much of it had been destroyed in an ancient battle. Only two buildings survived from its previous incarnation, the Great Library of Theroux and the Academy of Universal Magic.

The Academy was notable as the home of Urpo, the legendary Wizard who's life spanned generations. Urpo was allegedly the most



powerful being on Brith, but was also known as one of the most inert COGs in the game. The Arch-Mage was usually observed with his nose in books or wandering the school grounds in deep thought. He had only once taken an active role in the game, against the ancient dragon, Xoge.

Xoge had pursued a group of fleeing adventurers to town and made the mistake of attacking the Academy, which according to witnesses, prompted a lightning retaliation from the mage that turned the dragon into a fine white ash. This unwitting victory led many players to try replicate the feat, some coming up with very elaborate plans to lure powerful foes to the school, "Urpo baiting," as it became known, was the number two challenge in Steve Livingstone's much referenced "Twenty Near Impossible Yet Somehow Achievable Things to do in Brith." Apparently, the only thing more complicated was scoring a date with the High Elven Princess, Ketta Wenon, who was infamous for having the most difficult artificial personality in all of cyberspace.

As was usually the case upon entering Roh, Wang made a beeline for the Magician's Brew. It was run by celebrity chef, Rigby Gordon, and their food was legendary.

Gordon was not only a brilliant chef in life but also a cybercoder of exceptional skill. He knew intimately every single quirk of the Virtech® helmet's taste receptors and had found work-arounds for many. Not only could he make many real-world dishes taste the way they should, but he was able to create new unique flavours.

"I'll have an Irish elk steak, and I want the blood dripping off it," said Wang to a young serving girl. Vanja wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"You can't give me those vegan lines about the preservation of life when you go around slaughtering half the countryside, Vanja. This isn't real meat you know," said Wang, meeting her disapproval head on.

"It may not be real, but that doesn't mean I want to see and smell hunks of meat," Vanja replied.

“We can’t stay in Roh too long, other Metas are on the trail,” she continued.

“I know, I know, but we’ve covered our tracks well. There’s no way anyone is onto us,” Wang replied a little too loud, which seemed to catch the attention of a Druid who had been sitting quietly in the corner, taking slow drags on his pipe, his eyes covered by a flat, broad-brimmed hat.

It wasn’t much of a surprise that he was alone, Druids weren’t very popular in Brith. It was, however, a surprise that he was there at all. Druids were a very peculiar breed. It wasn’t enough that they isolated themselves socially in life, many did the same in game, living as cyberhermits far out in the wilderness.

"Nature Men" and "Shrub Rooters", as they were also called, were the butt of many jokes in Brith. The game designers had made them both underpowered and gave them a range of somewhat unsettling talents. Master Druids could control the forces of nature, including animals, plants and even insect swarms. The infamous Druidic spell “toxic cloud,”, which caused surrounding flora to secrete a green cloud of noxious gas, was considered by many to be the worst smell ever to be created in cyberspace, scoring a perfect 100 on the Fish Fries scale. Druidic powers were also notoriously difficult to control and many backfired on the caster. All this and more had made them by far the least favoured profession in the game.

“That Druid looks awfully familiar. Where have I seen him before?” whispered Wang. Vanja shrugged without giving him much of a glance.

The Druid slowly stood and walked towards their table.

“Hullo there,” he said in a cheery voice, instantly losing any veil of mystery he might have had.

“Good morning, good sir,” Wang stood and gave a low bow, “Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, Knight of the Golden Order at your service.

And this..." he gestured to his companion who nodded in acknowledgement, "...is Vanja, Ranger and Rider of Crad."

"We've met somewhere before, haven't we?" said the Druid, studying Wang's toothy smile and ridiculous Prince Valiant hair style.

"Quite possibly, good sir. You do look a trifle familiar, and we don't get many Druids around here. Perhaps you're looking for directions? The Forest of Shadows is just a day's ride to the southeast," said Wang, seating himself and shifting to get more comfortable.

"Oh, I heard some interesting news that brought me to town. Something happened here last night at that very table." He pointed to a large counter near the front of the tavern, "A miracle, they say." The Druid's eyes went wide as he leaned forward, "Edmund Blessed, ascended... to the realms above." The Druid put his hat to his chest as a show of respect. The gesture revealed a rather unfortunate hairline.

"You're not one of those Virtualists are you?"

"Oh no, of course not. I just take an interest in unusual happenings in Brith," said the Druid pulling up a nearby chair, "You know a popular theory is that Blessed was never real. He was simply created by some of the Virtualist elders. You know, as a figurehead, which would take the heat if the cult ever came under fire. Now that they've martyred him, it seems Virtualism is undergoing a bit of a renaissance. It's a clever play."

"That can't possibly be true," Vanja spoke for the first time, "I've met him and he was definitely human. He was far too much of a sleazebag to be artificial."

"You'd be surprised, young lady, just how human they can appear these days," the Druid replied, taking another slow drag on his pipe.

Als, or COGs (Cognisant Objects in Games) in *Neverborn* were generally no higher than a 4.3 on the Turing scale. This meant they could act resourcefully to fulfil tasks, but within a specific set of parameters. Arctik's recent hire, Yuki Matsumoto, was regarded as

one of the finest minds in the field of artificial intelligence. His impressive resume spanned real world industrial, military and even medical applications. His AIs operated within an error margin of less than 0.05% and were so capable they were regularly entrusted to handle decisions of life and death. Thanks to many of Matsumoto's innovations, COGs with a 5.0 rating were now making an appearance in Brith.

Truly sentient and self-aware Artificial Intelligences ranged 6.0 and above on the Turing scale and only two AI specialists had officially ever achieved this. The former AI Director at Arctik Studios, Daniel Rosenberg, was Peer Reviewed as the second greatest AI programmer of all time, though he had worked for many years in what he considered a "dead end job." The COGs he was forced to churn out were standard learning neural networks that served very basic functions. In his spare time, though, Daniel had created masterpieces. It was a passion that he devoted too much time to, which was frowned upon by his employers and he had parted on bad terms.

"But I digress. You've met Blessed you say?" continued the Druid.

"We both have," said Wang, butting in before Vanja could respond.

"Lovely chap, I thought. A bit eccentric. We met him and a few of his Virtualist associates during the Summer Solstice festival last year in the Twin Cities. Messy night... there was Boromir\_Skywalker, Tim\_the\_Enchanter, Knighty\_McKnight\_Face and a few others. Tim lives in Roh actually, we should drop in and visit him."

Vanja rolled her eyes at the suggestion, "We don't have time."

"I wouldn't mind meeting a few of these Virtualists. I'm keen to learn more about them." continued the Druid, as he eagerly consumed Wang's every word. "This Tim\_the\_Enchanter is nearby you say?"

"Well, he spends half his time here at the Magician's Brew. You can't miss him. He wears black robes with ram's horns. It looks quite silly

if you ask me but he's a charming fellow. Just wait around for a while and I'm sure he'll make an appearance."

"Well, that's very helpful. You have my thanks, Vanja and... Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, was it?"

"My friends call me 'Wang'," the knight replied with a slight nod.

"Call me Sol. I'm sure we'll see each other again," said the Druid with a wave as their meals arrived. He disappeared out the front door.

"Well, he was a friendly sort, wasn't he?" said Wang, carving into his steak with gusto, "Unusual looking chap. I can't help but think I've seen him somewhere before. There was something in his eyes."

"He was after something," replied Vanja with pursed lips that indicated she was even more uptight than usual, "There's a dog buried here."

"Good lord! Where? What sort of dog?" exclaimed Wang, abruptly downing his cutlery.

"I meant he seemed suspicious, to me."

"But what about the dog? What was its name?"

"Never mind. Forget the dog. It's a Swedish saying. Means there's something fishy afoot," said Vanja. The truth of the matter was that Vanja had in fact said "*Det Ligger en hund begravnen.*" but it had been translated through *UniversalTalk*® a little too literally.

Thanks to the *UniversalTalk*® engine, cyberspace was a world without barriers. People from every corner of the globe were able to chat and interact in real time without difficulty. *UniversalTalk*® was now integrated into almost every communication system worldwide. Whilst this had opened up new channels for diplomacy, education, shared knowledge and business growth, in Brith it meant more bad pickup lines and insults were thrown around than ever before.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** As you're aware, both the Seraphim and Dark Flame have started enrolling players to advance their agenda. So far, the process has been meeting projections, both groups now have top Meta players within their ranks. You could say that recruitment is going swell.

*Live to play!*



## CHAPTER 6

### THE TEA PARTY

**Just a few** miles east of Roh, at a very quaint manor house, a tea party was taking place. It had been going for rather some time. The host, a smashing chap by the name of Fothergill, started the party quite a number of years ago. The event was prompted by a single insight: tea was the one beverage that tasted truly authentic in cyberspace. The event gathered momentum over months and soon attracted sponsors, most notably tea importer Fortnum & Mason of London, and Wedgwood, which provided cyberreplicas of their original blue willow tableware. The garden party became so popular, and such an institution for tea lovers, that Arctik (with some monetary persuasion from sponsors) even installed routines to ensure that the worst weather experienced in the area was only a mild drizzle. This made many of the British attendees feel suitably at home.

There were a multitude of blends available. Various types of sandwiches and cakes were also served. It was an altogether civilised experience, which was halted only once, by a group of marauding accountants who fancied themselves a barbarian tribe by the name of "The Auditors", "The Auditors" were a group of government co-workers who were in fact auditors by trade. With many autonomous AI bots transitioning into their field, this particular department found themselves with rather a lot of free time on their hands. The Auditors took to the lands of Brith under the pretence of virtual team meetings, and became a formidable raiding party from the hill clans of the Skarred Mountains. Their reputation grew as they plundered nearby settlements, attacked wandering adventurers, and destroyed passing caravans. Their dubious activities lasted over a year before they abruptly ceased. it was a little ironic that it was an audit of their cyber usage that brought an end to both their cyber



operation and to the entire department, which was deemed no longer necessary. So ended the Auditors' reign of terror.

The tea party raid, which had resulted in a lot of smashed china, overturned tables, and spilt tea leaves, was soon forgotten and the tea was once more being brewed strong and the cucumber sandwiches served fresh. After running for six years straight, it had now become known as the 'Endless Tea Party.'

Cyrus, having postponed his momentary dream of becoming a Meta player, had made the executive decision that attendance at the tea party was mandatory whilst they were in the area. And so it was that Everett and Cyrus found themselves enjoying a lovely cup of tea in the company of about fifty other enthusiasts. The gardens were immaculately kept with an array of flowering beds and canopies with a distinctly old-world aesthetic. Cyrus was seated next to a Welsh girl by the name of Gwyneth.

"So, my dad was a musician and my mother was a social media star..." she explained to Cyrus, "They were both extremely disappointed that I wanted to join the professional cyberleague. Gen Zoomers indeed, humph," she concluded, "They're so old fashioned. And what did you do before becoming a gamer?"

"Ah, well..." began Cyrus "have you ever heard of quantum entanglement?" Gwyneth nodded politely, although she looked a little blank, "Well, I was working on my PhD at Cambridge actually, where we discovered we could create time displacement between entangled electrons... it's the closest thing we've found to sending messages back in time," he continued, "we could only create displacement of a few seconds but it was still exciting."

"That sounds magical!" Gwyneth appeared genuinely impressed, which seemed to please Cyrus, "You should be an enchanter or warlock, not a warrior."

"Why, I think that's an absolutely wizard suggestion. How are you gents? It's so nice to have you here again. More tea?" said their

host, Fothergill approaching them with a freshly brewed steaming pot. Cyrus nodded, keenly placing his cup in reach.

“And how are you finding the party? Food and tea to your liking?”

“Utterly scrumptious,” replied Everett, somewhat teasingly, “Delectable,” Cyrus agreed in the same tone.

“Oh, that warms my heart to hear. I can tell you’re true connoisseurs.” Fothergill lowered his voice, “We’ve had a lot of tourists through lately you know. Americans from the Twin Cities, rowdy lot. They really know how to spoil a good tea party. One of them even brought their own tomato sauce and put it on one of our savoury pastries,” he said, a little irately, “Well, do try the scones. They won’t affect your waistline.” Fothergill winked and flitted down the table to socialise with other guests.

Eating and drinking were in fact key parts of the game play mechanics providing added energy and endurance to cyberavatars. Binge eating in game had little effect on one’s health outside the game. Unlike earlier generations of gamers, who were often plagued by weight and fitness issues, hunger was often not felt in cyberspace and the body would acclimatise to the Spartan food schedule quickly. Being active in cyberspace also often caused involuntary muscle clenching and twitching, which acted as a form of body toning keeping players in relatively good shape.

“Tea parties and chit chat?” whispered Everett to Cyrus.

“What of it?” replied Cyrus who was attempting to stuff down a scone in a single bite.

“This is totally square! Why even come to Brith if this is all we’re going to do?”

“Just relax and enjoy it... it can’t all be monsters and mayhem.”

“Yeah, but we do more tea parties and pubs than adventure.”

Cyrus stayed silent taking another sip of tea.

Everett gave out a heavy sigh and sank into his seat. Surveying the tea party, he caught a flicker of recognition and gave Cyrus a gentle nudge.

“This could get a bit awkward. Trouble at five o’clock”. Cyrus glanced over slowly and almost spat out his tea. There, seated a few tables away, was his cyberex Alexa Jane, or Infanta\_Alexa as she was called in game. She was chatting animatedly with a roguish man with whom she was sharing cakes, “Oh god, has she seen us?” whispered Cyrus.

“No, I think we’re good,” assured Everett.

The relationship had not ended well. There was no firmly established etiquette for cyberrelationships, it was always case by case depending on the views of the individuals involved. Most treated cyber affairs quite casually whilst a few would become quite possessive of their partners. Infanta\_Alexa was one of the latter.

Cyrus was an understated sort. Not exactly a beta male, more like a zeta. He didn’t much feel the need to be the centre of attention but was master of himself and would act in his own best interests when required. It turned out he didn’t especially enjoy being bossed around, which had become the established pattern during his time spent with Alexa. Cyrus had given her the news at the Gastronic House in Lordshelm, a very well-to-do eating establishment. Suffice to say, he learned that his parrying skills were actually useful in a restaurant type setting, particularly when bottles of wine were being hurled through the air. Of course, some would say, Cyrus got off lightly.

The breakup of Tovil\_the\_Unkempt from the Dark Elf assassin, Lara\_Kith, had entered cyberlegend as the least amicable break up in Brith history. Dark Elves were known to be both ruthless and have something of a mean streak. That a certain type of player became a Dark Elf was no accident. The game engine had built-in personality profiling that often directed gamers with less savoury personality disorders into these sorts of roles. Narcissism, anti-social disorder,

and psychopathy were all common amongst Dark Elves, which made them a group to be avoided by anyone with a bit of common sense.

Dating a Dark Elf was universally regarded as a bad idea, so breaking up with one was an even worse one. After being informed of the separation, Lara tracked down Tovil and his new partner, and took to them with a ceremonial Elven war axe. This led to the popular saying “beware of exes with axes”, which was pretty sound advice even before this particular incident. Of course, no real harm could be done in cyberspace, and Tovil and his new partner were still together and active in Brith to this day, albeit using new avatars.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Cyrus.

“You can’t just book it out of the Endless Tea Party. It’s a terrible breach of conduct,” replied Everett, who despite his attempts to be a bit more ‘out there’, was much more bound to social conventions than he’d care to admit, “We’ll never be allowed back.”

“You were just complaining about being here,” said Cyrus with elevated eyebrows, “Look, we won’t be allowed back if she starts throwing teapots at us, either.”

“Well... that’s true. We need an excuse...”

“Well think fast. She’s going to see me if we stay here. That’s the last thing I need right now,” said Cyrus, being careful to keep his face averted, “Maybe some sort of distraction is in order.”

As though on cue, and in severe breach of established Tea Party protocol, nine black-clad knights arrived late to the party. They drew the attention of the other guests as they sauntered in through the back gate and seated themselves at the table, right between Cyrus and Alexa. Despite their menacing appearance, this actually offered a little relief to Cyrus who was starting to experience heightened nerve pains as was often the case when under duress.

Everett’s brow furrowed as the knights settled into their seats, “These knights shouldn’t be here,” he whispered to Cyrus.

“Well, that’s all well and good, but this is perfect. All eyes are on them and they’re blocking her view. Let’s go!”

“Not yet. These are Crusaders of the Dark Flame. They shouldn’t be coming to a tea party,” continued Everett turning to Cyrus. There was something in his eyes that gave Cyrus pause.

“Care to share?”

“Well, they’re a part of the new storyline. They’re really not the sort who attend tea parties.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re all ruthless cold-blooded killers... can you dig it? It’s a bit of a stretch that they’re here having high tea, don’t you think? They’re really not the social types. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless...” Everett trailed off, increasingly puzzled.

Fothergill, ever the charming host, approached the group of knights while servants brought out food for the new guests, “Hello, good knights,” he said clasping his hands together, “We’ve not had such a large party of distinguished warriors here in a while.” The knights removed their black skull-like helms to stare expressionlessly at him, “Splendid, splendid. Might I interest you in some tea and snacks?”

“More cakes,” a large knight said in a deep gravelly voice. The group was now eyes down and snacking on finger foods, gauntlets still on. They were not big on manners.

“Yes, more cakes. I think we’re running low on whipped cream too, let me check our supplies,” Fothergill pranced away giving various directions to his COG servants.

The knights displayed myriad battle scars across unshaven faces. A palpable aura of confidence seemed to surround their leader. He was younger and bigger than the others, and there was cunning etched clearly in his face. It suddenly dawned on Everett what was happening.

“We have to get out of here,” he said, suddenly.

“Well, that’s what I’ve been saying all along,” Cyrus replied.

“Listen, forget about Alexa, we have to get out of here, now. We’ll head to the bathroom then make a run for it.”

Everett grabbed Cyrus by the arm and pulled him up, “This is going to turn nasty, you with me?” he whispered, “Walk, don’t run. Play it casual until we’re out of view.”

They had just reached the outskirts of the manor when horns blared, from south of the estate. Everett deftly pulled Cyrus into a shadowy grove of trees.

“What are we doing?” persisted Cyrus.

“Shh,” cautioned Everett moving his hand downward to indicate less volume.

A chorus of horns blared out seemingly from every direction simultaneously, which put Cyrus’ teeth on edge.

The two stayed perfectly still for minutes. Everett watched Cyrus closely, cautioning silence with a gesture whenever he made an impatient move.

A dozen knights approached from the north, clanking past them with swords drawn. The two watched, sinking deeper into shadow as the menacing forces marched upon the tea party from every direction.

It was another minute before the screaming began.

“Let’s go,” whispered Everett as they made a break to the north.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *The war has begun on a covert level. During this phase we'll start to see interruptions to established events and Brith's economy may also start to come under significant strain... such is the effect of war. Our directive is that this is necessary for the narratives to progress. Whilst we must not interfere, it is still important to offer support to any cyberbusinesses within our eco system. Please be sure to extend every courtesy to our cyberentrepreneurs. They still remain the backbone of our economy.*

*Live to play!*





# CHAPTER 7

## THE PARTY AFTERMATH

“... **Sixteen, seventeen, and** eighteen,” said Wang, lining up the bodies of black clad Crusaders as was his custom. This time he had chosen to do so by the severity of wounds received. The row of bodies formed a nice gradient of red to black, which seemed to satisfy his needs for some sort of order.

“I’d say this tea party must have been a bit of a disaster.”

Vanja and Wang had just arrived that evening and engaged a number of crusaders still in the area. Many had been killed already by the Tea Party guests, or so they assumed. Forty-odd visitors had also been slain and Wang made it his task to arrange those bodies next. Amongst the fallen was a familiar face.

The body of Savron\_the\_Unrelenting, a distinguished Meta-player, had been found conspicuously surrounded by many crusader bodies, “Well, I guess he finally relented,” mused Wang, hauling his body over. Unlike many games, death was usually the end of the line for your character in *Neverborn*. The finality and risk involved in every venture was part of what made it exciting. Resurrection was possible but it meant recovery of the body by someone willing to pay the exorbitant fees to one of the temples capable of performing the rites. This possibility was the reason some Metas, like Vanja and Wang, formed close partnerships.

“Who could have killed Savron, though?” asked Vanja, whilst searching the bodies of the dead knights, “There aren’t many who could have done that.”

“You there, good Sir. Come out,” commanded Wang, catching a glimpse of movement in the garden’s shrubbery. Fothergill slowly emerged from the brush, looking thoroughly dishevelled rather than

his usual immaculate self, "Is it safe?" he asked, as Wang assisted him out of the bushes.

"You need not fear, good Sir. Can you shed some light on what happened here?"

"It was a slaughter," said Fothergill wide-eyed, "Worse than the Auditors. They killed my servants, they killed my guests, they killed my Tea Party," Fothergill started sniffing, "My sponsors will never forgive this... no tea... ever again. The endless tea party... ended,"

"You had a guest here, Savron\_the\_Unrelenting. Did you see what happened to him?"

"They killed him, they killed them all."

"Who killed Savron?" replied Wang trying very hard to be patient. It wasn't his forte.

"The knights in black. Oh, he held his own for a while. But there was a big one. He wasn't like the others, he killed half the guests himself, only Savron put up a bit of a fight. I've got to get out of here. I need to get to an exit point."

The game generally ran during certain hours allowing the game timeline to progress without a disjointed narrative with players coming and going. Exiting outside those hours was possible in extenuating circumstances, and exit points provided an opportunity to do so safely. You could override the game with the Virtech® controls and exit, but your avatar remained in game and would suffer the consequences of being present without a mind guiding them.

Fothergill ran to his house, to the soundtrack of his own thoughts, "Oh my, I have so much to do. Calls to make, I need to explain this to that marketing director, he's such a wretch to deal with..."

"What's your take on all this?" Wang said, turning to Vanja. Her insights on matters like these were usually correct. What she lacked in witty banter she more than made up for in her ability to think through situations in a way he simply couldn't. It's not that Wang was lacking intelligence, he was in fact something of a cyberprodigy, but

certain areas were a struggle. Particularly those involving people, their feelings and motivations, which often seemed just beyond his grasp.

“Savron may have been ahead of us on the quest. If there are multiple copies of the map, the Dark Flame would have been trying to reclaim Savron’s. We were attacked as well, remember?” she reminded Wang, “This could be lucky if they stopped him.” She was particularly good at extrapolating from just a few known details, “If the Crusaders have recruited Meta players, one of them could be leading them to the tomb to claim whatever’s there,” she concluded.

“Led by a Meta player. That might explain how the crusaders got ahead of us,” suggested Wang.

He turned to the cold body of Savron and tried his best to look respectful, “Better luck in your next cyberlife,” said Wang, doing a quick search of his body.

Of course, he didn’t expect to find anything of value. The first thing anyone did upon slaying a Meta player is take ownership of their possessions.

“No time to offer you a proper burial, I’m sure you’ll understand, have to make a move.” Wang thrust his sword point into the ground and knelt to offer a quick sermon, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, come back to Brith, in Brith we trust.” He paused a moment as if wanting to say more, then stood and motioned to Vanja that he was ready to leave.



## CHAPTER 8

### KYBURN FALLS

**“Have they gone yet?”** whispered Cyrus. Everett was at the opening in the side of the mountain. It was well concealed by foliage, though they still had a good view of the valley below.

“No, still there,” Everett said, his heightened senses in game made him the ideal look-out man. The crusader knights had pursued them for hours. It had been the very worst ending to a tea party that either could recall.

“The foot soldiers we could deal with, but that big knight’s a problem,” sighed Everett.

“How did you know about this tunnel, anyway?”

“We’re on the opposite side of Kyburn Falls. This is the back entrance to the Tomb of Leto.”

“Oh great, so you mean we either go out there and get killed by knights, or we go further in and get killed by a Meta construct. Either way we lose over a year’s investment in this game,” breathed Cyrus, sounding thoroughly deflated.

“This tunnel is hard to find, both from the inside and out. We’re safe for now.”

“Safe? Being stuck between two types of certain death is your idea of safe?” Cyrus objected in a loud whisper.

“Pipe down, they might still hear us. Just accept that we’re stuck here for a while.”

“We’re going to die...” lamented Cyrus, “I should have played Cybermon. No one dies in that world. I used to love those little guys. That little brown one, Eon. He was my favourite.”

“Before you resign yourself to dying, let’s just consider our options,” said Everett, now looking Cyrus directly in the eyes.

“Either we go out there, and try to sneak past the knights but probably get caught, or we fight our way out but probably get killed.”

“Seems likely,” agreed Cyrus.

“Or we sneak in, steal the Meta treasure, and try to sneak out the other side. We maybe get killed by an iron construct, but perhaps we can outrun it or leave unnoticed by it.”

“Hmmm,” considered Cyrus.

“And if we do succeed, we become part of the Meta game. It’s an easy choice in my opinion.”

“Do you even know what this treasure is?” Cyrus didn’t seem convinced.

“No idea. That was the narrative department. Those stuck-up posers managed to keep their jobs. Apparently, AIs are good at designing buildings but not good at weaving ‘intricate plots,” Everett sniffed, “A child could come up with some of their shallow stories, if you ask me.”

“I wonder if Alexa made it out?”

“You’re better off if she did,” said Everett who’d turned back to surveying the valley, “She’d just be back with a new avatar if she got herself killed. Anyway, you can’t keep running and avoiding every difficult situation. Can’t you just... you know... push yourself a little?”

They were words that were not unfamiliar to Cyrus. It had been a constant mantra from his father, “Always push yourself, don’t stand still.” He’d tried to live by those words until his dad passed away. His father’s death, and Cyrus’ illness had made him retreat inwards. The very thought of challenging himself felt overwhelming at times.

“Maybe it is the right time to die after all,” mumbled Cyrus, more to himself than Everett.

“You know, I’ll let you into a little secret. There’s a new feature when you die in Brith. Soft launched a few weeks ago. Your cyberlife flashes before your eyes. Pretty fly, don’t you think? It lasts less than a second but they replay your entire experience in Brith in a blink of an eye. It’s the bomb!” Everett said with the enthusiasm of someone finally unburdening themselves of secrets they’d kept for years.

“Well, we’ve had some good times here,” mused Cyrus, “Maybe we weren’t world changers, but there’s a few moments I’d like to see flash before my eyes again. I guess cyberdeath isn’t so bad.”

“Death isn’t the point though. I’m not sure what the point is, but dying isn’t it, just... well, think of it this way...” began Everett, “The goal in cyberspace isn’t any different to real life. It’s not about avoiding death; it’s about having some sort of legacy. You only fail at this game if no one remembers your time here. We’ve been playing this every day for over a year and what have we accomplished? What will we be remembered for? Just get out of your comfort zone for once.”

Cyrus went uncharacteristically silent. He usually found a way to complain about something, but at this moment, he was attempting to process a dozen disconnected thoughts.

“Hey,” whispered Everett, “I think they’re going. They’re heading out of the valley. We can probably book it out of here.”

“No, let’s do this,” said Cyrus unexpectedly.

“What?”

“Let’s do this, we’ll go in and try get this Meta item-thing.”

There was a moment’s silence as Everett digested what was being said. It was a rare occasion that Cyrus didn’t choose the path of least resistance. Seeing his friend was serious, he nodded and walked further down the tunnel, before turning around, “Well... no time to waste. If we’re doing this... let’s do it.”





## CHAPTER 9

### THE TOMB OF LETO

**“Sol is my** name,” the tall Druid said to the young elf girl. It had taken him sometime, working his way through the ranks of the Virtualists, before finding one who was actually with Blessed when the incident occurred, “I’m trying to piece together what exactly happened to Edmund. Such a loss. I’m writing a biography on him.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, yes, a book would be amazing. I’m Sapphire by the way,” the elf girl said with a surplus of bubbiness, “Have you heard about the Second Coming and Ascension?”

“Second Coming?”

“Oh yes, they’re saying Edmund will be back. He’ll come like a storm across the cyberworld and take us all with him. This time we’ll all ascend, not just him. It’ll be magical. Those who believe will awaken in the realm of the Reality Engineers. We’ll cast off our earthly forms and finally be ourselves again,” Sapphire said, with wide eyed wonder.

The Druid took a moment to absorb this and finally responded, “OK.” He continued scrawling a few notes in his small leather book, “But about the night that Blessed disappeared...”

“Oh yes. So, there were five of us at the table, and then these two guys came in. We were talking to them awhile, they weren’t Virtualists but seemed interested.”

“Not Virtualists?” Sol wrinkled his brow for a moment, “Why were they there?”

“I think they were just passing through, having a drink. But I’m sure they would be Virtualists by now after seeing that miracle. Who wouldn’t be?”

“Of course, yes. Can you describe them?” questioned the druid with a touch of impatience.

“Well one was a fairly stock standard warrior type, maybe a bit thin for a warrior. The other was a slightly odd looking fellow, sticky out ears and a straight pointed moustache like this.” she said, tracing a straight line under her nose.

“Do you remember their names?” pressed Sol.

“Maybe one was called Cyril... Cyrus... Simon? I can’t remember, it was such an immense moment...”

“Do you recall much else about them?” he interrupted to limit any unnecessary information.

“Well, they belonged to some other religion they said... and Cyril had been studying physics at Cambridge, I remember. Doing a PhD there. He was saying that Virtualism couldn’t be true for some reason...”. Sapphire kept a certain wide-eyed wonder as she spoke. She seemed oblivious to any hidden motives behind the line of questioning.

“Did you catch, which religious group they belonged to?”

“I don’t remember, but when Edmund came over to our table, he started chatting to them. That’s when that crystal-thing appeared.”

“So, Edmund was engaged with these two gents when the floating crystal appeared?” the druid asked leaning in with intensity.

“That’s right.”

“And what did these two do after he... err... ascended?”

“I’m not sure,” considered Sapphire, “There was a lot of commotion, and they disappeared at some point. I can’t remember when exactly.”

“This is very useful. I’d like to go over a few details with you again.” The Druid who had been fastidiously making notes, seemed quite

intrigued by Sapphire's recollection, "Let's start with their names. Cyril?"

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"You overdid it a bit with the cobwebs," said Cyrus, quickly regaining his talent for complaining. He waved his torch towards them to clear the way, "I'm not going to have a giant spider fall on my head, am I?"

"Cobwebs were the 'Surface Dressing and Particle Effects Department.' They're the ones responsible for cobwebs and this weird slime too," said Everett trying to wipe the goop from his hand onto the wall.

"The entire department lost their jobs. They didn't take it well." he continued, "They broke into the General Manager's virtual home and gave his surfaces a bit of an artistic do-over."

The two were now crawling on all fours through a small passage that led to a metal grate.

"...the story goes that he'd just invested in a virtual mansion in *Holloway Heights*. Brought his parents' home to show them, and it was covered in cobwebs, dust, mould and a few more unpleasant things. It's not as easy as you'd think to remove that stuff from virtual spaces. Takes a lot of manual time with a cleaning program... cleaning AIs aren't very smart and you can't trust them to not remove the paint on your walls. We thought it was hilarious when we found out. He got what he deserved, but he filed charges. Cybervandalism apparently."

Cybervandalism was an ever-growing problem in many virtual spaces. The worst incident in Brith was the work of the much-admired cyberactivist Captain\_Creampie, who was regarded as a bit of a hero amongst anti-establishmentarians. Creampie was the alter-ego of chemistry researcher Garfield Chesterton, who applied his advanced knowledge of both chemistry and cybercode to create

working foam bombs in VR. He often targeted high-profile players and celebrities with pranks, which drew a decent audience to his regular cybercast, 'Captain\_Creampie Cream Pies the Cyberverser.' However, a drunken evening in the Orsian hamlet of Shale led to the explosion of hundreds of these units, covering the entire village in a thick bubbly white foam. Arctik had been unfolding a new Brith narrative in Shale; that it was being run by a Vampire Cult. A Vampire Cult covered in foam was less terrifying than they'd planned. They canned the idea and Arctik quickly implemented anti-vandalism code, which essentially consisted of COGs forming angry mobs and tracking down the perpetrators.

This policy also backfired when cyberartist, Armitage\_Shanksie — a renowned figure in the art world — created a wall painting in Brith picturing Arctik CEO, Henry Spinks, dressed as a burglar pick-pocketing a number of Brith citizens. Shanksie was hunted down by an angry mob of COGs from the twin cities and suffered cyberdeath by lynching. Since then, Arctik had revised their procedures, and vandalism management is one of the few departments still requiring human assessment. Shanksie himself, whose fame grew for the fact he'd actually died for his art, was eventually reinstated in game as a special exemption and continues to make socially charged graffiti in Brith and many other cyberenvironments.

With a single kick from Cyrus, the metal grating at the end of the passageway came loose. On the other side was a large circular room, partially lit by cracks in the ceiling allowing moonlight to stream in. Water gushed into the chamber through various openings and was drained through a number of grates at floor level such as the one Everett and Cyrus had entered. Large clumps of vegetation hung from the ceiling, and a sturdy set of iron doors on the opposite side of the room remained closed. In the centre of the room was a rectangular sarcophagus, atop of which stood a large iron statue of a sagely looking chap, presumably in the likeness of Leto for whom the tomb was built. Clutched in the crossed arms of the figure was a large leather-bound book.

“So that’s the construct, presumably,” said Everett examining the statue, “And I guess that’s what we’re after,” he continued with a gesture to the book.

“Who is this Leto anyway? That statue doesn’t look very threatening,” said Cyrus.

“No idea, but there’s an inscription on the side here,” Everett said, clearing his throat.

“Here lies Leto of Roh. The greatest historian of the third age. Chronicler of the darkest chapter in Brith’s history. His legacy is Brith’s legacy. May we learn from his words.”

“So, what happened during the third age?”

“I don’t know... I’ve spent my time making Brith, not reading up on it.”

“You don’t know its history?”

“Well, I think a lot of it has been kept under wraps. I could tell you the history of the different styles of architecture from the different eras and regions. It’s pretty out there actually. You know, there’s a neo-baroque style, which is very current in Orsus. You could do worse than snap up a few estates as an investment right now.”

Investing in cyber real-estate was big business and a market that Everett understood well. In the real world, extremely high-density living was now the norm, and most had abandoned the dream of owning their own home. Instead, they would endeavour to create magnificent spaces for themselves in virtual reality. Almost everyone had their own virtual home where they spent much of their downtime. It was in these spaces that you'd entertain friends, relax, go for a swim in your virtual pool, and many of the everyday things that most people had once done in the real world. Ownership of such a property was initially cheap, but the price rose as demand grew. Incredible designer homes entered the market, some even sported their own private forests and parks. Themed houses, futuristic structures on alien worlds, space stations, fairy-tale palaces and

even medieval castles complete with moats and drawbridge all became available.

These were pricey but more or less still affordable. If, however, you wanted your home in a community environment such as *Holloway Heights* or a game setting like *Brith*, prices rose sharply due to finite availability. Cyberlocation was, of course, everything and the savvy investor was always looking for the next up-and-coming area of cyberspace.

"There's more," continued Everett who had spent the last few moments examining the sarcophagus closely, "It's in Elvish."

"I can't read Elvish? Can you?"

"Well, my character can't. But I think I can work it out," murmured Everett deep in concentration.

Characters fluent in a Brith language would have it auto translated (written or verbal) to their player's native tongue. There were over twenty languages on the continent of Brith designed from the ground up, each developed by linguistic experts with roots based in early proto-languages. Certain phrases, such as the Elvish, "*Qari pa*", meaning "anything goes", had gained such popularity they had developed into everyday usage. Of all virtual languages, Elvish in particular had become absurdly fashionable. There were over fifty-thousand basic speakers globally and a smaller group of just under a thousand advanced speakers. Greta Schultz, a language savant, made a public demonstration of achieving fluency in Elvish within forty-eight hours. When she suggested that it should be taught in all schools internationally as a universal dialect most didn't take her seriously, but with the signed backing of over a hundred linguistic professors and academics, a serious proposal was submitted and went for review before the board of education. When publicly questioned about the validity of the proposal, the British Minister for education shrugged his shoulders and simply replied, "*Qari pa*."

"Okay, I've got the gist of it," Everett said, after half a minute of examination. It says: Pay your respects, and knowledge will be

granted. You don't happen to have any flowers on you?" he asked.

"No of course I don't have flowers," snapped Cyrus, "What do we do now?"

"Well, we've got to pay our respects somehow, a sermon maybe... hey, I know, a song!" said Everett, transitioning into a shaky falsetto voiced version of Amazing Grace.

"Is it working?" asked Everett, pausing for breath. Or applause.

"No."

Everett took up the next verse.

"Shut up! It's not working. Keep that up and if that statue doesn't kill you, I will," fumed Cyrus.

"Hey, mellow out. I'm not hearing any keen ideas from you."

"Well, how about a prayer?"

"Okay. So how do we do that?"

"Well, you put your hands together like this, and you close your eyes and offer some silent thoughts."

The two stood for a moment praying at the statue. Everett eventually opened one eye to see if anything had happened, "It's not working." he said tapping Cyrus' shoulder.

"Give it a chance. Wait, I think we're supposed to kneel when we pray."

Cyrus knelt before the statue and with a sudden shudder, it started to move. Through a series of clever mechanisms, the automaton burst into life. It stooped down on one knee and unfolded its arms, holding the book out ceremoniously with its head bowed, before grinding to a halt.

"There we go, you did it. We just had to get down and grovel a bit to the statue. You're good at that," said Everett helping Cyrus up, who'd fallen over backwards when the automaton burst into action.

“You mean that’s all it does?” asked Cyrus, “It’s not going to strangle me if I take the book?”

“Hey yeah, it seems that way. Mondo cool,” said Everett a little uneasily. He wasn’t expecting things to be this simple. A Meta treasure was never acquired with this little effort.

Cyrus cautiously reached out and grasped the book, half expecting a viper to leap out. The statue remained still, and Cyrus breathed a sigh of relief.

“You got me all worked up for nothing,” he said, pushing the heavy tome into his backpack, “I don’t know why I was so worried. It must be the change of season; I think I get seasonal anxiety.”

“Well, it’s usually not this simple,” acknowledged Everett, looking around the room with a sudden lump in his throat, “Don’t get too chill yet.” He was sure some new threat was going to come hurtling out of the shadows.

The game designers had in fact, orchestrated a clever and challenging end to this particular mission. The key was socialising two different quest streams and tracking the progress of pursuing parties, delaying them where necessary in order to co-ordinate a simultaneous discovery of the tomb. It was essentially choreographing key players to reach a certain point, at a certain time. This, they assumed, would invariably lead to a conflict between Meta players fighting for the artifact. Of course, Everett and Cyrus flew under the radar, having found the tomb’s location through other means. However, the moment of their discovery did coincidentally align with the planned timing of events.

Without warning, a terrific pounding came on the large metal doors, shaking them in their frame. Everett, already in a nervous state, audibly gulped as he shot Cyrus a worried glance. A second hit was delivered, which tore the doors off their hinges. There, silhouetted against the moonlight, was a lone figure dressed in black armour.

“Oh shoot,” whispered Everett, “I knew this wouldn’t be so easy.”



The newcomer took a moment, quietly observing the scene, “I require the manuscript he clutches. Then we depart and your old woman will not lament your casualty.” He spoke in a deep, hollow voice

“What did he say?” asked Cyrus, wrinkling his nose with incomprehension.

“It’s that knight from the tea party,” Everett said in low tones, “He must be speaking a language that *UniversalTalk*® doesn’t translate well.”

Everett was correct in his assessment. The stranger, Jun, also known as The\_Black\_Death, spoke the little used Waxiang dialect of Chinese native to the Guangdong region. Whilst all major languages were efficiently translated, the *UniversalTalk*® engine still struggled with certain rare dialects. Especially little effort was put into dialects with perceived fading usage.

“Your steel cannot have intercourse with my armour,” continued the knight threateningly, “Let fall the manuscript and stroll to absence.”

Cyrus winced at the butchered translation, “‘Intercourse with his armour?’ Is it just me, or are his lips not quite matching his words?”

“There’s sometimes a time lag when *UniversalTalk*® struggles.”

“It reminds me of those old badly dubbed movies.”

“Never mind that, we’ve got to get out of here,” Everett said with a fleeting look towards the tunnel from where they entered.

The knight slid a black blade from its scabbard. It burst into flame, emanating a pale blue light as he advanced into the chamber. With remarkable speed, the crusader leapt onto the stone coffin, cutting the iron automaton’s head off with a single stroke of his sword.

“Do not absurdly postpone, it only encourages your refrigerated cadavers.”

“We’re screwed.” said Cyrus retreating in alarm, “He can have the book.”

“Well, it’s no use to us if we’re dead, but that’s probably on the cards whether we hand it over or not,” replied Everett, backing up against the wall.

A quiet *thwang* resonated from outside the chamber, followed by a muffled thud, which seemed to get the crusader’s attention. The knight turned to face two figures on horseback standing beyond the doorway, bathed in moonlight. An arrow now protruded from his back which, surprisingly, did manage to have rather ‘deep intercourse’ with his armour.

One of the figures, a knight in gleaming plate mail, dismounted and bowed to the black knight.

“Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, Knight of the Golden Order at your service, and my companion, who has already greeted you in her own way, is Vanja, Ranger and Rider of Crad.”

Wang drew his own sword, a luminous blade, which beamed with a silver light.

“We seek the Tome of Leto, good sir. If you’d be so kind as to hand it over.”

A second arrow was launched, this time hitting the black knight in the knee.

“Patience, Vanja. Give the good fellow a chance to respond,” Wang said with a raised hand.

“These dullards control the paperback, not I. You have selected the immoral battle.” The crusader, now facing his new assailants, took up a battle-ready stance crouched low with his sword in both hands.

“Oh yes, I see them. Hello,” said Wang with a friendly wave, “We’ll get to them later, but we do have another issue to discuss. You see there was this tea party, which was gate crashed. Untidy affair. Apparently the fellow responsible for it looked just like you.”

“Their tea was flavoured like compost. Not suitable tea. Your family name is Sino, you should comprehend.”

“Uh no, I’m not from China, I’m afraid my name has another meaning,” said Wang, a little embarrassed.

Another arrow was let loose but this time it was deftly deflected by a quick movement of the crusader’s sword. The feat seemed to surprise Vanja, who shared a concerned glance with Wang.

“Well, it looks like we have a fight on our hands,” said Wang as he moved to enter the chamber, Vanja followed, drawing a slender curved blade.

“Let’s book it,” Everett whispered to Cyrus, “whilst they’re distracted.”

The two made a hasty retreat towards the tunnel and started crawling at a frantic pace. Behind them a whirlwind of motion tore up as the combatants engaged, the sounds of battle pursuing Cyrus and Everett down the narrow corridor.

“We’re going to have every single Meta player after us,” whispered Everett as they squeezed through the passage.

“Well, we are getting rather good at running away, aren’t we? I can add that and grovelling as my special skills.” said Cyrus as they made a bid for freedom.



# CHAPTER 10

## META DUEL

**A clash of** Meta players was a sight to behold. It was the closest thing to seeing superhuman combatants engage, and would draw large audiences when cybercast. The speed, finesse and subtlety of movement made it top entertainment. Bookies offered odds on many matchups in the global 200 and you could place a wager on who would emerge victorious, the duration of the engagement, and even the method of victory with varying odds dependent on rank and style compatibility.

What made Meta players so special was raw brain processing power. In his much-cited study of the Meta game, neuroscientist Jimmy Tan conducted a study of over fifty of the top Brith Metas amongst other cybergaming groups. He found that Meta players possessed more efficient brains and faster synapses than any other group he had studied, "Their brains were running at absolute peak performance," Tan noted, "Brith and environments like it are perhaps the biggest waste of great minds we've ever witnessed."

Another fascinating observation from the study was that there seemed to be no correlation between hand-eye coordination in real life and cyberspace. Virtech® helms bypassed the nervous system altogether. Blindness, deafness, even missing a limb was irrelevant in the virtual world. The brain processed the sensory inputs as if everything was in place and functioning as it should.

A prime example of this was the ten-year reigning champion of cybercage combat: a real-life paraplegic by the name of Thibault Boucher. Thibault\_the\_Butcher was left paralysed after an accident in his youth, but was gifted with one of the fastest thought reaction speeds ever studied. He developed a style of fighting unlike anything seen before, based on speed and reflexes alone. Only Suzuka

Yamamoto, who moonlighted as the number two ranked Brith Meta, Suzuka\_the\_Shadow\_Assassin, had recorded faster reaction times. She was significantly more gifted than any other player in the elite ten. The Brith number one, Ferbert\_the\_Invincible, remained unavailable for profiling.

The three opponents took up ready positions within the confines of the tomb. All possessed exceptional gifts as was befitting of top seeded Metas. They were well matched, and their talents were in line with Jimmy Tan's paper.

In the red corner stood The\_Black\_Death, ranked 96 and wielding his mystic blue fire crusader sword. Jun was amongst the first players to join the Order of the Dark Flame. His quest achievements were few but in addition to being a successful cyberproperty investor, he had earned his position by spreading chaos across the lands and in particular, hunting and duelling other ranked opponents. For Jun there was nothing more satisfying than crushing noobs in the Meta ranks. The agenda of the crusaders suited his playing style well.

In the blue corner were Vanja and Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, ranked 188 and 187 respectively. Vanja was a master archer but also an expert swordswoman, who now brandished her curved Katana of Fortification. Wang wielded his Luna Blade, which was now at maximum strength within the light of the full moon. The two had blazed through the ranks and their forward momentum showed no sign of slowing. They worked extremely well together with tightly coordinated moves that could often outclass stronger adversaries.

"Bereavement will loom over your relatives," Jun yelled confidently as they engaged. He knew his best chance was to even the odds quickly by utilising his superior speed and power to overwhelm one of his foes.

It was a sound strategy and may have worked had he directed it at the right opponent. Wang was often reckless, relying on his offensive capability without adequate attention to defence. This would have made him more vulnerable to a focused assault. Instead, Jun

attacked Vanja, thinking her leather armour made her the more exposed opponent. A barrage of blows came her way.

“Hurricane of bitterness,” he yelled, directing a series of blindingly fast sword thrusts at Vanja. Jun was that rare player who still called out his moves as he executed them. A common practice when the game first launched, but one that was now considered extremely passé.

Other poorly translated manoeuvres like “Unconquerable Argument” and “Delicate Counter-Semicircle” soon followed, each neutralised with swift movements of Vanja’s blade.

Sweat and blood flew as skilled attacks were met with equally adept counters. Wang shoulder charged in with a ‘Meteoric Lunge’, which met an immovable ‘Insomniac’s Guard’ as the black knight dug his heels in. A sophisticated whirlwind of blade strokes that Jun labelled, ‘Cantankerous Dragon’s Tongue’ was neutralised by Vanja’s ‘Iron Storm’; an equally complex series of sword movements creating a terrific clanging as their blades connected again and again.

As advertised, Vanja’s Katana of Fortification significantly bolstered her already strong defensive sword play. She expertly blocked, parried and countered The\_Black\_Death, whilst Wang attacked from the flanks. Jun was fast, faster than both his opponents, but not fast enough to avoid a flickering stab to the thigh and a deep slash to the shoulder blade.

It was a drawn-out battle, which was precisely what Vanja and Wang intended. Wearing down an opponent was a tedious process, but often necessary. Small wounds were inflicted on both sides, but the key to victory was to land a ‘finishing move’, which was a difficult proposition against a skilled opponent. However, as wounds accumulated and fatigue set in, the slow down would make opponents more susceptible to a fatal strike.

It was after a considerable depletion of energy reserves on all sides that Jun considered a change of tack. Vanja’s defence had stalemated much of his offence and Wang had landed several blows,

which were having a cumulative effect. Backing away, Jun addressed his opponents, "OK, conceivably we can generate an arrangement?"

"Arrangement?" queried Wang, "That's what your mum was after too, but please... continue."

The statement made Jun hesitate, but he persisted with his train of thought, "I allow you both to breathe and we all stalk the paperback shoplifters. They are accurate enemy."

"Why would we agree to that?"

"It is superior arrangement, brings pleasure for all of us."

"Your mum said that too."

Whilst this didn't quite translate, the Crusader, sensing that he was the butt of some joke, got a touch defensive, "My mother is high-quality female; she looks after ancestors."

"Well, she looks after a lot of things. That's assuming 'ancestors' is some sort of euphemism?"

Vanja rolled her eyes, but Wang's absurdities did pay dividends at times.

"You cannot mock me; I am far above the ground in crusaders. You will be sought forever if I am trounced."

Wang did not have an immediate comeback. It was taking a little effort to decipher the meaning of Jun's last statement.

"No deal. You have planted your last potato," Vanja cut in.

"Really? Don't you start with your weird Swedish phrases, too," said Wang, "It's hard enough trying to keep up with anything he says. I'm still waiting to hear what became of that dog you mentioned."

"Enough," Jun bellowed, "Talk does not cook rice. Arrangement or none?"



“I think this is the oddest mid-battle conversation I’ve ever had. Can we just leave the rice and potatoes out of this please? It’s starting to make me feel a bit peckish.”

In one smooth motion, Vanja readied her bow and launched a final arrow at The\_Black\_Death. It was averted with a deft parry, but Jun did not anticipate her following through with an acrobatic sword lunge. Vanja’s katana lodged under his chin and pierced through his neck.

The crusader staggered forward on one knee looking at Vanja in disbelief. His eyes narrowed and he locked Vanja in his gaze before defiantly saying, “Rice is better than potatoes.” And with that, The\_Black\_Death keeled over.

“Well, that’s got to hurt,” said Wang as he started divesting the crusader of his magical armaments.

“He wasn’t expecting the follow up blow,” said Vanja.

“Oh, your sword stroke? Yes, that was very good. Excellent technique. But, no I was talking about his comment about rice and potatoes. Now that’s got to sting. Personally, I like them both, sometimes together. Rice and a Brick Lane potato curry. You can’t beat it; I think I’ll order some tonight.”

“Your priorities always surprise me. We have to recover Leto’s Tome, let’s get this done quickly.” Vanja busied herself searching for valuable items in the crusader’s backpack.

“Always in a rush, aren’t you? Those two didn’t look like they’d get far. I’m sure we’ll easily catch up with them. We’ve at least got time for me to sign our good work here,” he said, placing the point of his sword on the black knight’s breastplate.



# CHAPTER 11

## SUSPECTS

**Cyrus and Everett** had escaped through the valley and set up camp in a secluded spot a few miles down the Faraday River. It wasn't well visited in the spring, but drew a crowd for its barrel riding competitions during the summer. By chance, a former barrel riding champion by the handle of Hugo\_Shaggins was working late that night on his new racing prototypes. He was not just a rider but a master craftsman who used a little Brith magic to enhance his hydrodynamic barrels, but today he was having a particularly bad time of things. Two barrels had failed buoyancy and a third had broken against the rocks.

Seeing Cyrus and Everett make camp, he approached them suspiciously. No one ever came to this particular stretch of the river. It was a highly irregular occurrence, which wore on his already frayed nerves. This was sacred barrel country after all, and this particular patch was his, or at least it was in his mind.

"Do you be here to steal me barrel designs?" he said in a high-pitched voice, one hand on his dagger, "Yer be looking like filthy thieves to me."

"What?" said Cyrus.

"I said yer be looking like filthy thieves after me barrel designs."

Cyrus blinked his eyes. It was a rather bizarre conversation to be having out of the blue, even by Brith standards. Everett smoothly interrupted, "We're not trying to steal anything. We've had a long day and just need a break."

Hugo drew his dagger and waved it threateningly at the two. At just under five feet tall, he didn't appear especially menacing, but it

wasn't always wise to judge by appearances in Brith, "You won't get away with it," began Hugo, "Me barrel designs are secret; I'll be winning back the championship."

"Now look here, I don't know who you are, but we don't care about your barrels," said Cyrus, who had had enough of this strange interloper, "Please just bugger off and go lodge your barrels somewhere dark."

Hugo drew in a deep breath of surprise followed by some facial scrunching that was meant to look threatening, "So, you've discovered where I've been keepin' me barrels? Thieves!" Hugo was incensed, rattling his dagger at them, "You ain't heard the last o' this! I'll be seein' yer... I'll be watchin' yer," he said storming off down the river bank, muttering to himself.

"What exactly was he on about? Strange little man," said Cyrus.

"I don't think we want to know," sighed Everett.

They watched cautiously as Hugo disappeared into the darkness. Finally satisfied that he'd left, they settled to relax by the campfire.

"So, what are we going to do with this?" Cyrus said, pulling the book of Leto out of his pack, "It's indecipherable." He flicked through the pages, which were filled with a strange form of runic, "It's of no use to us, we're just Meta-bait now."

"It's in Ancient Argoethian, no one can read it. There's a couple of COGs who could decipher it for us. Urpo maybe?" replied Everett examining the pages.

"We'd never get into the academy to see him. This is the problem with playing the Meta game, we're simply not Meta players. They'd have their own means of getting in there, but we just don't have that sort of resource or money."

"Mondo then?"

"And how are we supposed to get to his cloud citadel?" queried Cyrus, "And don't even mention Domi, you know she'll just feed us to

a dragon. None of the arch-mages would be any help to us.”

“Well look, there’s another possibility. It’s a bit out there, but hear me out,” said Everett coming in close to talk in a low voice, “There’s this COG based in Tolwich, I think we should meet them. Rumour has it that they can translate this sort of thing, they’re very knowledgeable about all sorts of things.”

“Tolwich? That’s a bit of a trek. Who are they?”

“They’re called the Polymath. At least that’s what I’ve heard. Look, I don’t know that much, there’s a lot of story threads that are ‘need to know’ only and there’s privately owned interests in Brith too. I don’t know where they came from, but the Lyrax College where they’re based is a renowned learning centre. I think it’s a solid bet they can translate this.”

“And how are we going to avoid every Meta who wants the Tome along the way? We wouldn’t stand a chance if some high-ranking jerk decided to deprive us of the Tome.”

“Just play it cool. No one knows who we are, we’re nobodies. Who’s going to be looking for us?”

Cyrus nodded. Being nobody was one of their strengths.

“We stay off the roads, and we have a better chance of getting there in one piece than if we were ranked,” finished Everett.

There was something a little odd about this logic, but Cyrus, as much as he hated to admit it, was enjoying having a sense of purpose again. Besides, it was almost time for game shutdown, which would give him some time to think.

“Well, we don’t have any better ideas. Let me think about it during cybervation.”

Cyber environments like Brith were legally required to close for eight hours per day. It allowed engineers to perform any maintenance or upgrades to the game infrastructure but more importantly players would use this time to freshen up and look after the body’s needs.

Food and hygiene were of course the primary focus. Sleep was a bonus, but could also be safely done in cyberspace if required.

Cyber addiction had become so problematic that at one point people were spending days at a time in VR, which prompted enforced regulations for virtual worlds like Brith. The key incident that brought about this change was the case of the Robinson family. A mother, father and their twelve-year-old son had spent four days straight in cybermon. They were saved from dehydration by a worried relative who was able to get them to hospital in time. Speaking after recovery, the father, Peter Robinson, said, "It was bad timing, a few minutes more and I would have caught that shimmering Aveon. They sell for over \$25,000!" He then successfully sued his sister-in-law for the value of the lost Cybermon plus damages.

Detective Booth had spent more than the regulation amount of time in cyberspace. He'd been hopping between Brith and research in private environments. The time compression phenomenon was discovered soon after the Virtech® helms were first tested. Unlike previous forms of VR, which were still reliant on the participant's sensory inputs, the Virtech® bypassed the nervous system and all its evolutionary inefficiencies altogether. It was soon discovered that without all the biological baggage, the brain could process time much faster than was previously thought. The upshot of all this was that a perceived two days in cyberspace would only require fourteen or so hours in real time, which made everyone far more productive in VR.

Even very mundane tasks like searching records were accomplished much more quickly in cyberspace. It was precisely this undertaking that Detective Booth found himself doing that evening. His first avenue of inquiry had not been fruitful. The finances of the Church of Virtualism were complex, but everything seemed above board. There were a number of large purchases, but only three were large enough to merit further investigation.

"Thirty million transferred to an off-world trust account, ten million to a tech supplier by the name of DR Sentience, and fifty to the MAG

Exotic Virtual Locations Fabricator,” Booth murmured highlighting the lines in the spreadsheet.

Edmund Blessed collected funds from his top layer of management, the demi-cyberprophets, and funded expansion projects centrally. His books remained in order; the funds untouched. Edmund didn't let his lieutenants get involved and was instead, reliant on a high-level COG, Sidonia, for a lot of the operational work. An internal coup seemed unlikely. If this was murder, money wasn't the motive, although there was a lot of it lying around. It was a very similar scenario as the first victim, Iorwerth Prosser.

But Booth had another lead. He had cross-referenced timestamps, cyberspace coordinates, tax records and university enrolments to find his targets. The first, a former university researcher by the name of Cyrus Paxton. A fairly unremarkable fellow, obviously intelligent based on his academic record, but there was nothing that would indicate he was able to hack cyberspace. His companion, though, was an interesting one. James Everett, a former Arctik studio employee who was recently made redundant. Losing his job could be motive enough to start corrupting the system, Booth supposed. He downloaded their full profiles, which would be tonight's reading. Whether they were suspects or accidental witnesses, he wasn't sure, but a few words with these two was on the cards.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *An artifact, critical to the narrative has apparently gone wayward. We are currently trying to track its location but as you're aware, privacy laws prevent us from identifying individuals directly involved. Whilst we're confident that it will soon end up with a Meta capable of moving the story forward, the Hive systems are dispatching COGs from both the Seraphim and the Dark Crusaders to ensure the item isn't lost.*

*Live to play!*





## CHAPTER 12

### CYBERVATION

**Cyrus dreaded cybervation.** His usual routine was to take care of business as quickly as possible and re-enter cyberspace at his virtual home until Brith re-opened. Just an hour outside VR with his nerve pains exposed was about all he could endure. With today's excitement, he could only manage thirty minutes before the situation became intolerable. He skipped his shower and eagerly plugged into his cyberhouse.

Cyrus' virtual home was grand and loosely modelled on Highclere Castle, which was made famous by the vintage TV serial, *Downton Abbey*. It had been purchased for a steal from cyberretail giant, Tatler & Addington. Older style estates had gone out of vogue. Architects were now creating spaces that took full advantage of VR. The latest trend was delicate sculpted forms, which would be impossible to actually construct from an engineering perspective. Some of the more Avant Garde layouts even had reality defying features like larger interiors than exteriors, and a few were even built with multifaceted living surfaces reminiscent of an MC Escher artwork. Virtual reality had really rewritten the book on home design.

Despite its grandeur, Cyrus' home was situated in isolation rather than connected to any cybercommunity. Only invited guests with the correct coordinates could visit. This didn't bother him; he'd learned to enjoy his own company. It was getting dark when the doorbell rang.

"Mum? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know the reason, I brought a cake for us."

She seemed especially cheerful this evening, "How'd you do in the cyberleague, today? Surely you're at the top of the tables by now?"

“Mum, we just spoke about this a few weeks ago, nothing’s really changed. I’m trying... but it takes time.”

“You remember what your dad used to say...” she said strolling past him into the house and making herself comfortable in a nearby sitting room. The interior of Cyrus cyberhome was like entering a time warp to the nineteenth century. A true connoisseur of the era may have noticed a strange mix of Victorian furniture and a few older French style pieces, but Cyrus’ sense of aesthetic wasn’t that attuned. He simply liked the old-world look.

“... do what you love, and you’ll do well at it. You were always the cleverest in your class,” she went on, “I’m sure it won’t be long now before you land a big sponsorship deal.”

Cyrus simply nodded politely. It didn’t seem very likely at this point but there was a little bit of hope he supposed.

“Oh, did you hear the news about those Virtualists?” she asked.

“What news?”

“Their leader died. It was all very sudden. A heart attack whilst plugged in apparently. Just this morning.”

“Oh really?” said Cyrus sitting down, his brows contracting sharply.

“Oh yes, he was still really young. His followers are saying he’s entered some sort of higher state. Its big news, everyone’s talking about it. Surprised you haven’t heard.”

Cyrus wasn’t one for keeping up with current affairs. Sure, the occasional bit of news would filter through, but his daily feeds usually consisted of kitten and puppy videos rather than anything of real consequence. The news tended to depress him, and besides, he hadn’t unplugged since the incident.

“It was a heart attack? Are they sure?” he asked, trying to remember the events of that evening.

“That’s what they’re saying in the mainstream news. But you know I’ve got my finger on the pulse of alternative reports too.”

The mere mention of alternative news was usually enough to cause Cyrus' eyes to roll uncontrollably. It was the intellectual equivalent of a knee jerk reaction. But this evening, he was so absorbed by recent events that he remained still and silent. His mum took it as a go ahead to rattle off a few conspiracy theories.

"Some people are saying that he was never real. No one had really dealt with him outside cyberspace, you know. They're saying Virtualism was created by Virtech® and some of the big cyberrealities. Arctik, the cybermon company, New Eden... they were all in on it, the CSPs too. The whole Virtualist thing was just there to get more people spending more time in VR." She took a deep breath before continuing, "But there are also some who are saying he was murdered."

"Murdered?" repeated Cyrus. He was suddenly finding his recollection of events extremely troubling.

"Oh yes, you know Bob Tatler the trillionaire, richest man in the world. His daughter was involved with Virtualism. The story goes that she was close to Edmund Blessed, but her dad wanted her out of the cult. He supposedly paid hackers who found a way to shut him down in cyberspace. They say the circumstances around his death were a bit suspicious, and Tatler had called him out as a charlatan publicly many times. A bit fishy, don't you think?"

His mum's news channels were far from reliable, but the word 'murder' was now etched into Cyrus' mind.

"There's even more. Some are saying he's not really dead. That the whole thing is just a great big publicity stunt..."

*Murder.* The word continued to circulate through his thoughts. Cyrus was so disturbed he could no longer pay attention to anything being said. Had Blessed been murdered? It was possible he supposed. And what's more, he could be a witness. The very idea drowned out everything else. Not a word penetrated as his mum listed out an array of increasingly exotic theories.

“Mum,” he finally interrupted, “Why are you here? Why the cake?”

“Did you forget? It’s his birthday.” Cyrus looked blankly at her for a moment, “Your dad’s.” She started getting a little weepy, “I thought you’d like to celebrate with me.”

Cyrus’ heart sank. He had become so caught up in recent events that he *had* forgotten.

Walking over, he sat himself next to his mum, putting his arms around her, “I miss him too, mum,” he said quietly. The two sat for long moments before she finally said, “Oh, it’s an apple pudding cake. His favourite. I’ll get us some plates.”

“You were so special to him, Cyrus,” she continued rifling through the dining ware in a nearby cabinet, “When you started your PhD, he was so proud... he was happy at the end. I think his heart would have broken if he’d been there when you got sick. Your achievements were his own... and he would have taken on your troubles too.”

Cyrus took small spoons of his cake in silence. The words landed, but it was often better to allow his mum to monologue when she was feeling sentimental.

“You know, I was clearing out the attic and I found a whole box full of old things... I’m going to go through it tomorrow,” she continued downing her cake.

The two ate and chatted for some time. Cyrus’ mum eventually left, fairly contented after they’d had a chance to talk and reminisce. Left alone in his enormous cybermansion, Cyrus was suddenly feeling very alone. For the rest of the evening, he couldn’t sleep, nor could he even bring himself to watch puppy videos. Instead, he lay awake thinking about his dad, death, murder and where life had taken him.



## CHAPTER 13

### SKARA BRAE

**“Did you hear** about, Edmund?” Cyrus and Everett were following the river to Tolwich.

“Of course, I did. The news is everywhere. It’s a total trip!” replied Everett, getting quite lively as he spoke, “And we were there! Maybe we saw a little piece of cyberhistory first hand. How cool is that?”

“I heard a theory that he may have been murdered. There was that strange crystal thing...”

“The Virtech® helm prevents any high degree of pain or neural trauma. You can’t cause harm to anyone in cyberspace. It’s just not physically possible. It’s got to be coincidence.”

“That’s what I thought. But it was awfully peculiar...” Cyrus trailed off.

“Let’s get moving,” said Everett, “Tolwich is a couple of days from here, and whoever won that fight is going to be after us.”

Almost as soon as he had said it, Cyrus caught the sound of hoof beats behind them. Looking back, he glimpsed horses heading in their direction, “Oh, here comes trouble,” he said, breaking into a sprint.

“Run!” he yelled as he dashed past Everett.

Everett bolted down the riverbank after him, “What are we running from?” he asked as he caught up to Cyrus.

“Metas.”

Everett glanced back to see Vanja closing in fast on horseback. Wang trailed another fifty feet behind.

“We can’t outrun them on foot,” breathed Everett, “Those barrels!” he yelled to Cyrus, pointing to a cluster of them floating in the river tethered by ropes.

Cyrus made a leap and landed safely on one, “Hurry!” he exclaimed, drawing his sword. Everett made a leap onto another before Cyrus cut the ropes with a single slash. The barrels accelerated with the fast-moving river.

Vanja came to a stop by the riverbank, watching as they floated rapidly out of reach. Wang soon caught up, steadying his horse beside her.

“Well, that’s thrown a spanner in the works,” said Wang disappointedly.

A short figure emerged from the surrounding woods and shook his fist as the barrels disappeared down the river.

“I knew it! Thieves! Filthy thieves! They stole me barrels,” cried Hugo\_Shaggins completely ignoring Vanja and Wang.

“Good sir,” began Wang, approaching Hugo on horseback, “Do you know where this river leads?”

“Those vagabonds! They’ve stolen me designs. Lying cut purses. I knew it the moment I saw them,” he continued undaunted, “And who be you then, yer great big lumbering lump?” he said, suddenly noticing the knight.

“Why, thank you,” said Wang who was keen to expedite the conversation, “We’re here to catch the thieves. They took something of ours, too. Where does the river lead?”

“To the Skarred basin. Lake Yarrin, o’ course.”

“Are there any towns along the way?”

“There be New Hopetoun on the west bank and Skara Brae further down on the east bank. If you be catching them. Give ‘em one from Hugo, eh?”



“Thank you, good sir. I’ll be sure to.”

Vanja and Wang didn’t waste a moment and rode through the forest, taking a shortcut to their next destination.

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“Quite remarkable,” said Cyrus as they entered Skara Brae. Towns of the same name were a bit of a theme in game environments, named after the ancient ruins found in Orkney. This particular iteration featured buildings created in a traditional Tudor style, but there was something modern about their design that Cyrus couldn’t put his finger on.

“The styling is medieval,” explained Everett, “but the scale is completely wrong. You wouldn’t find wide roads and open spaces like this back in the day. Even the buildings are better designed to capture light for open plan living. The town’s always been considered a bit of an architectural marvel, don’t you think?”

“Everyone here is so calm and serene... not to mention these robes that everyone is wearing. It’s like someone’s attempt at creating a pulpy sci-fi utopia,” observed Cyrus.

“There’s a lot of history to this place. I’ve never been here before, but I’ve heard a lot about it. It’s gained a reputation as a kind of spiritual retreat, And did you know Lord\_Scottish lives here? Like, how awesome is that?!” exclaimed Everett, visibly showing his excitement.

“Who?”

“Lord\_Scottish! Scotty Garrett? He’s only the greatest game designer in the history of games. Haven’t you heard of him? Don’t you know the Proxima series? Genesis? Journey of the Avatar? Knights of Providence?”

Cyrus returned a blank look.

“Oh man, have you missed out. They were like, old twentieth century games, but they were remade by Cybernetic Arts back in the fifties. They were the absolute bomb. It was like a spiritual journey of self-discovery. Completely game changing!”

Cyrus clearly had no idea what Everett was talking about and was instead focusing on the surrounds as they walked through town.

“Well, maybe it’s a game designer thing,” Everett mumbled, “I hear he’s gotten a bit eccentric in his old age, but we can’t visit Skara Brae and not meet him! He designed this entire place – it’s like a spiritual retreat. People come here from all around to pick up on a bit of ‘patience, love and duty’,” He waved his fingers through the air in a peace sign.

“Oh, look,” said Cyrus pointing towards a notice in the town square, which they’d just entered, “The ‘Bards of Aerynhall’ are playing here later today.”

Many bands played the Brith circuit and *Neverborn* was often credited as the driving force behind the Gaelic/Scandinavian folk revival that dominated the charts. With almost all music being distributed freely, the bands themselves earned more from their royalties in cyberenvironments than through any other channel including live performances. The Bards of Aerynhall, were amongst the most popular bands of the day. They were formed by a group of players in Brith who limited their performances to cyberspace. Many speculated why The Bards never performed live, but the closely guarded truth of the matter was that their line-up was nowhere near the musical technicians that their virtual selves were. Their complex tunes required a finger dexterity and vocal mastery that they simply couldn’t keep up with in real life. Despite this shortcoming, or perhaps because of it, they acted in a way that earned them the reputation of being the most conceited band of their generation.

“Forget the Bards. We’ve got bigger fish to fry,” said Everett. He wasn’t a fan for the simple fact that he’d once had the misfortune to meet them.

“Actually, we need some food for our journey... unless you want to go hunting along the way,” said Cyrus.

“Hunting? Meh. Too much work. Look, if you don’t mind... how about you pick up the food, and I’m going to go check out the Proxima Museum? It’s got a lot of artifacts from the old games in there. I really want to see it. We can meet by the central keep in thirty minutes, then drop in and say ‘hi,’ to Lord\_Scottish.”

“Is it a smart move to waste time doing that?”

“Come on, this is Scotty Garrett, he’s one of my biggest heroes. I wouldn’t get in the way if you wanted to meet Hawkins or Einstein.”

“They’re both dead.”

“Scotty’s an old man, he’s probably not got much time either. I’ll never get another chance.”

“Fine,” grumbled Cyrus with a heavy sigh, “I’ll see you there.”

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *We've managed to secure 'The Bards of Aerynhall' for our office summer solstice party. They will be doing their first ever live performance using Virtech's® prototype Holostage® technology. This promising tech is destined to make its way to theatres and performance centres around the world and we are privileged to be amongst the first to see it in action. The tech itself opens up new avenues for us to engage and entertain and we already have teams working on ways to enhance our existing suite of products.*

*Live to play!*



## CHAPTER 14

### NEW HOPETOUN

**New Hopetoun** was the next stop for Vanja and Wang. The ‘Bear and Staff’, a tavern that was known to travellers for their high-quality mead, was the only notable landmark. It was a well-weathered building, with a small, dark and extremely cramped wooden interior not dissimilar to other small-town inns in Brith.

“Good morning, good sir. We’ll have two cups of your finest mead,” said Wang. The pub seemed relatively quiet. They were all very generic ‘small town’ COGs. The sort you could argue with about ‘foreign visitors’ but wouldn’t have much else of interest to say. With a nod, the barman quickly readied mugs.

“Actually, we’re looking for a warrior and a rogue,” Wang continued whilst drinks were poured, “They’re both a bit above average height. The warrior wore blue splint mail and the other chap was a bit unusual looking: big eyes, straight moustache and sticky out ears... reminded me a bit of a mouse.”

The tavern master, an older gent with large sideburns, frowned, “I’ve not seen anyone like that ‘round ‘ere. If they’ve passed through, ‘opetoun, yer could try askin’ ‘round the markets.”

“I thank you, good sir,” replied Wang dropping a couple of coins on the counter. COGs were always a lot more forthcoming with information to paying customers. He carried the drinks to a table located under rickety stairs, which made it even darker and more cramped than the rest of the tavern.

“They sound a bit ‘west country’ around here, don’t they?” said Wang, handing a mug to Vanja, “So, I was thinking, maybe we should split up?” he asked, swallowing as much mead as he could in a single gulp. Vanja was usually the decision maker in such matters.

“We’d certainly cover a lot more ground that way, and I don’t think those chaps would offer much resistance to either of us,” considered Wang.

Vanja was about to respond when the tavern doors opened. Five heavily armoured knights entered, and sat themselves at the only table large enough to accommodate them. Unlike the Dark Crusaders, their plate mail was well polished and gleamed in the low light of the tavern. A particularly well-built knight, who appeared to be their commander, removed his helm and took to the tavern floor scrutinizing the small group of patrons, his gaze persisting for a moment on Vanja and Wang.

He was a remarkably striking fellow, even by Brith standards. Clean shaven with short cropped dark curls of hair. He walked with the kind of arrogant self-assuredness that only the very handsome men had. When he was sure he had captured everyone’s attention, he addressed the room.

“I am Count\_Alymere of Tharl,” His voice projected through the room, “We’re after a book, which was stolen. A thick leatherbound volume written in Ancient Argoethian. The Seraphim high command has ordered its recovery. Any information that leads to its whereabouts will be rewarded. You can expect a very handsome sum... perhaps even as handsome as I am,” he said with a smile, which he aimed mainly at Vanja. She ignored him.

The tavern patrons remained unresponsive to the announcement, which seemed to dishearten the Count a little.

“Well, should you hear anything, please talk to us. We’ll have knights stationed in town. It would be invaluable,” Alymere finished, and walked to the tavern counter.

“Count\_Alymere? Have you heard of him?” whispered Wang. Vanja gave a slight shake of her head with a sideways glance towards the bar, as if to indicate that now wasn’t the time to discuss.

Upon placing his order, Alymere took a seat near Vanja and Wang's table. He'd been eyeing the two with curiosity. They were obviously a cut above the usual riff-raff that visited these sorts of places.

"Well met, Sir Knight," he began addressing Wang, "The Order of the Seraphim are recruiting. We could use a man like you."

"Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, at your service..." said Wang bowing as best he could whilst remaining seated and cramped, "... and Vanja." he said with a wave towards his companion.

"Not *the* Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang? The one who carves giant cocks on defeated opponents?"

"The same," replied Wang tilting his head in acknowledgement.

"You've been really giving it to the Crusaders of the Dark Flame. They really don't like you. I'm a fan of your work," said Alymere, smiling broadly, "Word just reached us that you also slew The\_Black\_Death. That couldn't have been easy, nor come at a better time. He was a challenging adversary."

"More Vanja's handiwork than mine, but we're a team."

"Ah, beautiful and talented," he said turning his perfect smile towards Vanja, "So, you were there when the Tome of Leto was stolen. Did you get a look at the thieves?"

"The tome was already gone when we arrived," said Vanja, "They had broken in through a drainage tunnel. We were hoping you might know something of it."

"I'm afraid not," sighed Alymere, with a hint of worry in his voice, "It's imperative we find it before the Dark Crusaders, though. There's more at stake here than anyone realises. We have a few patrols out searching for it already. I'm heading the operation to recover it." Alymere spoke with a solemn tone, but quickly regained his smile, "What brings you to New Hopetoun? Was it the mead?"

"Actually, we were on our way to Skara Brae. We thought we'd relax and unwind a little there. It's been a very eventful last few days for



us,” said Vanja before Wang could reply. She was by far the better at navigating these sorts of conversations.

“Wonderful!” replied the Count, “You might catch the Bards of Aerynhall. I hear they’re playing there soon.”

“Ah! Here come our drinks,” Aymere said, grabbing a mug from the tavern master’s tray as he walked past, “It’s probably time I joined my men. Charmed to meet such accomplished adventurers.” He held his mug high as if to acknowledge their deeds, “Oh, and one other thing.” The smile suddenly left his face, “Just a word of advice. Until the tome is recovered, I suggest you don’t get in the way. We wouldn’t want any misunderstandings to happen.” Aymere gave them a final wink before walking to sit with his associates at the far end of the tavern.

“Well, I think we’ve finally met someone more pompous than me,” mused Wang.

Vanja finished her mead quickly and sat in silence as Wang finished his. When he was done, she leaned in and said in a quiet but firm voice.

“We stay together.”



## CHAPTER 15

### LORD\_SCOTTISH

**“I’m so excited!”** Everett said in a loud whisper as he and Cyrus stood in the antechamber awaiting their summons, “Lord\_Scottish! He’s the reason I became a game designer. Meeting him is totally off the hook.” Everett had returned from the Proxima Museum on a high. It had been a rare opportunity to recollect some of his fondest childhood memories.

“So Scotty Garrett, Lord\_Scottish, he came up with these principles in Proxima — duty, love and patience. Mixing duty and patience you get fortitude, from love and duty comes commitment, and love and patience leads to charity. When you combine all three base principles, comes the awakening of righteousness,” Everett continued, “I swear, I developed more of a moral framework from those games than I ever did from school... or my parents.”

“It’s a workable system,” supposed Cyrus.

“And people would naturally gravitate to one principle over another. Like for instance, if you’re sworn to a lord, and you’re ordered to collect taxes that will ruin a poor family, do you simply perform your duty or are you charitable to the family?” asked Everett eagerly.

“Charitable, of course!”

“Well, I think most people would choose that these days. But there’s still some who wouldn’t. We had debt collectors even earlier this century who would gladly mess up people’s lives out of a sense of duty.”

“So, what was the aim of the games?”

“Well, you learned the principles and lived by them.”

“What? That’s it?” Cyrus said making no effort to hide his surprise.

“No, no, no, it was so much more than that. A total trip, like nothing we’d seen before. Sure, there were quests to complete and monsters to fight but the real goal was to become a living embodiment of those qualities. The living embodiment of those virtues, the Avatar of Legend,” finished Everett, “They really were a landmark event. Some say they’re the reason people stopped acting like utter twats in cyberspace.”

“Lord\_Scottish will see you now,” said a white-haired man in formal black attire opening the doors to the grand hall.

The throne room was immense and lavish. The floors, walls and high ceiling were made from white marble as were eight large evenly spaced pillars reaching from floor to ceiling. A centrally placed red carpet ran the length of the room leading to an upraised platform at the end. Seated there, on a throne of ebony and gold, was an unassuming, bearded man in his mid-sixties. He wore a modest crown and was wrapped in fluffed up purple robes. The lord looked particularly bored and tired from the day’s proceedings with his head slumped in one hand. A smaller throne of similar make remained empty to his left.

“Announce yourselves,” whispered the white-haired servant to Everett and Cyrus.

“Err... James Everett. At your service.”

“And Cyrus... also at your service... I guess.”

“Good day, pilgrims, and welcome to the halls of Skara Brae. May you find sanctuary here on your path to enlightenment,” began Lord\_Scottish in a bored but well-practiced manner, “Your guide, Shanomi,” he gestured to his servant, “can give you a tour of the castle grounds, if it pleases you.” The monotone was momentarily paused by a yawn, “There is much to do in the town of Skara Brae. With patience, we will awaken your hearts and open your mind. It is both our duty and pleasure to ensure you receive the care and...”

“Lord\_Scottish,” began Everett interrupting, “We’re not here for that. I’m a huge fan of your work. I’ve played all your games, and they inspired me to become a game designer myself. I think you’re one of the greatest, most mind-blowingly talented game designers of all time.”

The Lord seemed to awaken from a daze. He regarded Everett, then Cyrus, as if seeing them for the first time, “You mean you’re not more of those cybersex addicts?”

“No. Not at all,” said Cyrus firmly.

“Ah. Well... welcome then!” Lord\_Scottish said straightening himself in his seat, “And I mean it. Welcome! Our other guests are welcome here too, of course, but you do get fatigue, dealing with cybersex addicts all day. You know, I’m over a hundred years old, it’s hard for me to understand ‘hot blood’ sometimes,” he said clearing his throat.

“So, what brings you to Skara Brae... if you’re not... you know... perverts? It wasn’t our intent, to specialise in treating those poor souls. We were hoping this would be a place of enlightenment for everyone, you know.”

“Well, we were passing through, and we couldn’t just leave without meeting you. You’re Scotty Garrett. You’re one of my biggest inspirations,” Everett said.

“One of your biggest? And who else is on your list?”

“Well, I guess there’s Spinks, Mueller and Nakamura. And going further back Miyamoto, Meier, even Gygax.”

“Aha! You flatter me! Sounds like I’m in good company.” He gestured around the room, “Back in my day, we never dreamt something like this would be possible. It’s a miracle of technology. You probably understand this virtual craziness better than I do. Who do you work for?”

“Well, I just finished my contract with Arctik. I guess I’m freelance now,” replied Everett.

Scotty raised an eyebrow and pointed a finger at Everett.

“Don’t go freelance. Stop working for others. Create your own game! There is nothing more rewarding than creating your own world, even if it’s a small one. Be lord of your own creation. And not just a lord, it’ll give you a kind of immortality.”

“Immortality?” questioned Everett.

“Yes, your world, your game, your own mythology, you’ll be immortalised! You’ll make a small mark on the world and someone, somewhere, will love your game and their lives will be transformed. Ideas are an extension of you, and as long as people remember them, you’re never truly dead. That’s a kind of immortality.”

“You know, I tried to make myself immortal in the games as well,” Scotty mused and let out a small laugh, “But the players ... they always found a way to kill me. They were so sneaky about it, luring me over to be shot by cannons, poisoning my food, setting me on fire. They always somehow found a way to bend the rules.”

“When I recreated Skara Brae, in Brith, I thought to myself, ‘this place is where people will come to heal. A spiritual place to live by the principles of the Proxima series. I won’t be a target here.’ But I was so paranoid they’d try kill me here, too,” he chuckled, “So, I fortified this keep. It’d take an army to get in here now. And I even bought myself a little extra protection.” Lord\_Scottish turned to Shanomi, “Can you fetch Ava? It’s safe for her, they’re not the usual sex crazed lunatics. At least I don’t think you are, are you?”

“Certainly not!” replied Cyrus as Shanomi disappeared through a side door.

“Good! Yes, Ava. Well, that’s what I call her. She is the Incarnation of the Proxima Avatar and easily a match for any Meta player in the land. If anyone broke into this castle, they’d have to contend with her.”

“Wait,” said Everett a little confused, “You’re saying you’ve recreated the Avatar of Legend in Brith?”

“I have,” replied Scotty, “and she’s more perfect than you can imagine.”

A stunningly beautiful tall dark-haired girl with deep blue eyes entered the room. She was dressed in plate armour covered by blue robes; the symbol of a golden ankh was emblazoned across her breast, “This is Ava. Ava meet our two guests.” She bowed with a hand across her chest before seating herself in the throne beside Lord\_Scottish.

Cyrus and Everett were both a little wide eyed but managed to nod and mumble greetings.

“This one... what’s your name again?” asked Scotty.

“Everett.”

“Everett here, is a game designer like I used to be.”

“How remarkable! Game design is a challenging field. There’s so much to learn,” Ava said smiling. Everett suddenly felt a little giddy as her gaze fell upon him.

“Wait, you know what a game designer is? You’re not a COG, Ava?” asked Everett.

“No. I *am* artificial, but I’m completely self-aware, I’m not bound by any of the parameters of Brith,” she replied with a smile.

“Ava’s cognisance is over a six on the Turing scale,” interrupted Scotty proudly, “She’s every bit as capable as you or I. Every bit as clever and adaptable, maybe more so. You know most humans can’t even get above a 6.3. Ava’s a 6.6.”

“I’m completely aware of the reality I live in, and its relationship to the real world. I’ve learned a lot despite being stuck in this castle,” Ava gave a light hearted giggle, “But I’ll be allowed to travel soon. Perhaps one day, I’ll even be able to visit the real world too,” she smiled and gave Scotty a sideways glance.

“Soon, my dear. But there is much of this world you still have to experience first. You’ll get a chance to explore. You have my word,

once your training is finished,” replied Lord\_Scottish.

“There aren’t many COGs like Ava in Brith. She’s amazing, isn’t she? As human as you or me,” Lord\_Scottish beamed like a proud father.

“But anyway, as I was saying, if anyone did try to break in here. I’ve got Ava here to protect me. And she’s not just a living embodiment of duty, patience and love, she’s a damn fine warrior. Perfect in every way.” Ava visibly shrunk in her seat, seemingly embarrassed by Scotty’s praise.

“Has anyone actually tried to assassinate you?” asked Cyrus, trying to follow and add to the conversation.

“Not a one... and I’ve got to admit. The longer I’m here, the less likely I think it is.” Scotty scratched his beard contemplatively, “Things have changed since my day. It took me years, but I’ve found something here, something I didn’t possess back then. It makes me no longer a target. Can you guess what that is?”

Cyrus and Everett exchanged blank looks.

“Obscurity. It happens to all of us in the end. We sit at the top of our fields for so long, we sometimes think it’ll last forever. But after a while, fewer and fewer people remember us. There even comes a time when you don’t want to be in the spotlight anymore. I’m not bothered, so long as they remember my work, that’s where real immortality lies. Brith isn’t my world, this isn’t my story. But I’m humbly still making a small contribution to it. And helping people in a way I couldn’t before.”

He turned to Ava, and said, “May I please have the ankh, dear?” Ava nodded removing a golden chain from around her neck and handed it to Scotty.

“Here, I want you to have this... from one game designer to another.” The Lord stood, and beckoned Everett forward. He placed it in his hands, gently closing his fingers around it.

Everett was genuinely awed, “Thank you!” he exclaimed holding the ankh nervously.



“The ankh of the avatar! It’s an honour,” Everett wanted to say more, but could only stare at the golden object, “This is so generous!”

“I’m sure I won’t be needing it. And perhaps it’s me who should be thanking you.” Lord\_Scottish said returning to his throne, “Thank you. For remembering an old man... and for remembering my work. You’ve made this old man a happy one, today.” Scotty smiled and suddenly hung his head tiredly. For a fleeting moment he did look a hundred rather than the sixty-year-old presented in game.

“But now if you’ll forgive me. I think I’ll need a nap. This body runs like a machine, but the mind tires easily. I’ve kept my mind as fit as possible, but it’s not what it used to be. There’s no better place than cyberspace for keeping the mind active, you know.”

Cyrus and Everett bowed deeply and said their goodbyes before being guided outside the keep.

“They were nice young men, didn’t you think?” asked Scotty turning to Ava, “Maybe everyone just seems nice when you’re dealing with perverts all day.”

“I liked them, they seemed very taken with you,” replied Ava.

Lord\_Scottish laughed, “I think they were more taken with you. But at least in the right way.” He followed with a smaller chuckle, “I shouldn’t have to be constantly shielding you from our visitors.” A light in the corner of his eye suddenly caught Scotty’s attention.

“Oh, look at that,” he said to Ava as a strange crystal shaped polygon floated across the room. It morphed from one shape to another as it spun along a central axis, “It’s very pretty, Ava. Don’t you think?” said Lord\_Scottish as it glided slowly towards the throne.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *We have just received news. It is with great sadness that we announce that Scotty Garret AKA Lord\_Scottish has passed away from a heart attack. He was 104 years old. Some of you will remember him as the colourful lord of Skara Brae, a village retreat on the northern tip of the Kingdom of Orsus. Those of us who have been around the industry, will remember him as one of the pioneers of the fantasy game genre. He even developed the world's first MMORPG , a term, which he himself coined. We owe him a debt of gratitude for his many contributions to the field and we will be creating a virtual memorial to him in Skara Brae. Our thoughts go out to his friends and family.*

*Live to play!*



## CHAPTER 16

### BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

**Skara Brae** was alive with activity. It had only been an hour's journey from New Hopetoun for Vanja and Wang, but the closer they got, the busier the roads were. The Bards of Aerynhall were performing later that day and they had drawn a substantial crowd. Many had arrived solely for the show, which was to be held in the town square.

These visitors were the true aficionados of 'live music' or as close as you could get to 'live' in VR. At several hundred strong, it was small when compared to concerts of the past, but it wasn't really necessary to be at the actual event these days. Thousands more would watch the cybercast in their own good time and these delayed viewings were considered just as good as being there. The performers themselves, preferred playing to smaller crowds too. It was less pressure, more intimate, and easier to manage. After all, they still earned revenue from streamed casts and musicians as a whole were doing better today than they had been in decades.

Cybercasts first gained popularity in the 2040s. The Astrovid-42 pandemic had been the death of large-scale musical and sporting events. The development of the Imojin® AV capture system, which could seamlessly stream virtual performances, made attending shows a bit of a specialised novelty.

Music columnist, Roger Applebee, wrote of them:

"I can think of no reason why I would attend a live performance again. If the hassle of driving, parking or public transport to some seedy venue, isn't enough to kill your enthusiasm, the shows themselves usually do. Dealing with crowds, drunkenness, sleazy behaviour, long queues, and worst of all — an obscured view of the

actual performance is now entirely unnecessary. Imojin®'s multi camera rig with AI stitching, creates an experience, which not only feels real through a Virtech® helm, but in my opinion, is far superior to being there. Once immersed, you can see the concert from any angle, get up on stage and sing along, and simply enjoy the mastery and skill of the performers in a way never before possible.

After experiencing such acts as The Sleepless Choir and The Flatulators in VR, I've made a decision to abstain from live shows, even if Elvis himself came back from the dead to perform. Speaking of Elvis, his recorded Vegas shows have now been 'virtualised' as fully immersive experiences generated with the help of a QUISC Artificial Intelligence. You can now view many iconic performances of the past as if you were there. Hendrix at Woodstock, the Beatles at Shea Stadium and my personal favourite — Queen's epic performance of Bohemian Rhapsody at Live Aid, to name a few. Do yourself a favour and check it out... you'll be launched into a virtual experience so intense; you'll be forced to wonder... Is this real life? Or just fantasy?"

Vanja and Wang stabled their horse and continued on foot towards the town square.

"Are they still following us?" whispered Wang to Vanja as they walked amongst the assembling masses in Skara Brae.

"Of course. They're not very good at being stealthy. There's at least three of them. We can probably lose them in town," replied Vanja.

Crowds were filling the town plaza and they zigzagged through the throng in an effort to lose their pursuers. The gambit seemed to pay off as they made a surreptitious exit, unseen down a side alleyway.

The Seraphim had been trailing them since their encounter in New Hopetoun. They had different methods and ideals than their great rivals, the Dark Crusaders, but both groups were equally relentless in pursuit of their goals.

“Count\_Alymere slipped up with a vital piece of information,” whispered Vanja as they navigated the winding back alleys.

“And what was that?” asked Wang, trying to remember what exactly had been said.

“The tome is written in Ancient Aergothian. That means those two can’t do anything with it. Not unless they can find a COG capable of translating it. There could be one in the central keep. All castles have a scholar, we’ll be quick.”

Skara Brae Keep was a well-fortified structure. It had a moat, drawbridge, ramparts, battlements, flanking towers and many other features, which made it highly defensible. This afternoon however, the castle had been left wide open. Once inside, Wang and Vanja were allowed to roam freely. The keep staff were by and large rushing around frantically seemingly oblivious to their presence.

“There’s something a bit odd happening here,” whispered Wang, “No stationed guards, people running around as if it’s the end of the world. What’s that expression you used? There’s a potato buried here.”

“Dog,” replied Vanja, “There’s a *dog* buried here. Buried potatoes aren’t that suspicious.”

The two were headed to the main audience chamber when they heard a familiar voice.

“Well, hullo there. Fancy seeing you both here.”

Standing against the wall was the Druid, Sol, whom they’d met at the Magician’s Brew. He took a slow drag of his pipe as the two approached.

“Good afternoon, good sir,” Wang said with a slight bow, “It is a strange coincidence to see you here. We’ve had quite a merry adventure since we last spoke. How is it you find yourself in Skara Brae?”

“I’m here to pay my respects to Lord\_Scottish. He was the lord here in Skara Brae. Passed away this morning. Terribly sad news. The castle staff are in chaos. He used to run quite a tight ship apparently and now no one seems to know what to do with themselves.”

“Another death? Such a grave matter. You seem to be the bearer of such tidings,” said Wang trying his best to look solemn, “What happened to the good lord?”

“Unusual circumstances, but they say it was a heart attack. I was hoping to find out more from someone named, Ava, who was the Lord’s second in command. Tall, pretty, dark haired girl. She wore full plate armour. Have you seen her around the keep? She was apparently screaming ‘murder’ and left the castle rather distraught.”

Of all crimes, murder was amongst the least common in the cyberage. There was simply no reason for anyone to do it. Even if you were the sort who really, really, wanted to commit murder, you could do so extremely believably in a simulation, without having to face any real-world consequences. There were several niche environments designed specifically for this purpose.

The most terrifying of all virtual destinations was Simpson Valley, a re-creation of 1950s small town America, with a twist. Apart from the fifty-thousand-odd hapless COGs that populated the environment, there were at least a thousand would-be-serial killers who would prey on the COGs and each other. It was closely studied by both criminologists and psychologists who hailed it as one of the most useful social experiments ever conducted in the field. There were mountains of valuable data collected, which has since been used to easily identify and treat those suffering from psychopathic disorders.

The environment ran for quite a few years until a white hat, by the name of Krzysztof Wojcik, whose own psychological profile was closer to “mass murderer” than “serial killer” decided it was time to end the simulation. He was able to use exploits to fabricate enough explosives in game to rig the entire populated region of the valley. The ‘Simpson Valley Reckoning’ ended the game and earned

Krzysztof infamy and acclaim from certain interest groups. Wojcik himself disappeared without a trace a year later.

"Murder?" Wang repeated with some amusement.

"I can't say I've seen this, Ava person," said Wang, "We've only just arrived."

"And what brings you all the way to Skara Brae?" asked Sol.

"Well, we've been led on a terrific chase. Trying to find these two chaps, a rogue and a warrior. Have you seen anyone like that?"

Vanja gave Wang a swift elbow in the side, warning him off saying more. However, a passing servant dressed in black reacted to Wang's inquiry.

"Forgive me, Sir Knight, for overhearing your conversation. But there was a rogue and warrior here today in court. They were the last visitors to see the Lord before the incident."

Wang visibly brightened and Sol also leaned in to listen intently.

"Their names were James Everett and Cyrus, Sir Knight," the servant continued, "The rogue had a pointed moustache and the warrior wore blue armour," Sol's eyes narrowed and he removed a small notebook from a pocket, which he started marking up with notes.

"Did they say where they were going?" inquired Wang.

"They did not, Sir Knight, but they took the eastern road out of town," finished the servant.

"Thank you, good sir!" Wang winked at Vanja. He was rather pleased with himself. For once, he'd been the one to get some useful information.

"How do you know those two?" asked Sol curiously as they prepared to leave.

"They're old friends," Vanja intervened before Wang could respond. The Druid looked unconvinced but continued scrawling notes as they



spoke.

“Seems to have been a lot of death going around lately,” said Wang getting ready to leave.

“That there has been,” replied Sol, finally lifting his gaze from his notebook. He watched Wang and Vanja as they hurriedly left the castle.

The Bards of Aerynhall had taken the stage. They were the only band in history to successfully cover Queen’s Bohemian Rhapsody to much critical acclaim. They always opened their show with the iconic track, much to the delight of the audience. The song had become something of an anthem for the cyberbeatniks, and it was, in fact, their cover, which had led to the renewed interest in music of that era.

The crowd cheered as the song began, but there was one amongst them for whom the music stirred deep emotions. Or perhaps they were only simulated emotions, she wasn’t certain about the nature of her own reality anymore. Ava had fled the castle after Lord\_Scottish’s death. He had been a father and mentor to her. He had always been there, and most important of all, he was real with layers and hidden depths to discover. Not like the rest of the mindless shades who dwelt within the keep. Now he was gone and her entire future, which had been carefully mapped out was gone with him. And worst of all, she was unable to protect him, like she always said she would.

The crowd had gone quiet, mesmerised by the vocal harmonies as plucky strings started to build around them. Ava found herself holding back tears. A cocktail of emotions was building inside her. Anger, sadness, grief, but strangest of all was an inexplicable inner voice that had been slowly getting louder. A voice telling her to travel east.

The song slowly built into a vocal and musical wave that swept the audience along with it. They were now swaying and singing in unison to the music.

As the song reached its epic climax, Ava pulled her hood low and pushed her way through the throbbing crowd. A particularly, large hulking barbarian stood in her way, shoving her back as she tried to slide past. She effortlessly grabbed him by the throat and tossed him onto the crowd. He was enthusiastically carried away by a wave of hands that pulled him towards the stage. Ava continued to push her way through, this time with determination. The audience seemed to ripple around her as she easily forced her way through to the edge of the throng and made a direct line for the stables.

It only took Ava moments to saddle her horse. As she rode east to the outskirts of town, the song came to its dramatic close, the music drifting towards her on the evening breeze.



## CHAPTER 17

### KARMA

**Karma came in** many forms on Brith and it was not always proportionate. For the former Simpson Valley serial killer, Rory Hague, you could say he got what he deserved. Rory, had brought his murderous activities to the shire of Falkirk becoming known as the Falkirk\_Dentist for obvious reasons. He would harvest the teeth of his victims and carry them with him as a kind of gruesome trophy. Rory had thirteen canines and a molar gilded in gold, strung together on an elaborate necklace. It was his most prized possession.

As creepy as Rory was, there were inhabitants on Brith who were far creepier. The skin creeper, for example, was so creepy it actually had the word 'creep' in its name. These human size arachnid-like monsters possessed sharp razor like legs and a head that resembled a human skull. They would kill their victims with a potent venom, strip their skin and crawl inside. They could then impersonate their victim flawlessly.

Fortunately, these creatures were extremely rare, and what's more, they were able to sense 'bad karma' and targeted individuals who had engaged in unsavoury practices. The Falkirk\_Dentist fell victim to one of his victims who happened to be a Skin Creeper masquerading as a dark elf. Now using the guise of the dentist, himself, the creeper took up residence in his isolated hut, located in a swamp at the western edge of the Shire. There it had remained motionless for two weeks, in a hibernation-like state waiting for an appropriate victim to come into range of its karmic sensors. With a subtle twitch of its nose, it began to sniff the air. Then with a series of jerky actions, it stretched itself out and walked slowly towards the door moving towards its newly acquired target with a laser like precision.

“So, what does the ankh actually do?” asked Cyrus.

“Well, I don’t think it does anything,” replied Everett who was now wearing it around his neck, “It never did anything in the actual Proxima games... it was just a symbol. But still, I’m pretty amped about it.”

“You were pretty ‘amped’ about the whole meeting. Especially meeting Ava,” smirked Cyrus.

“And who wouldn’t be? I saw the way you were staring too.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“I know you’re always saying you’re unsusceptible to beauty, but everyone’s affected by *that* sort of beauty.”

“I was not!”

“Look, drop the Zen shtick,” Everett said dismissively, “I don’t blame you. She was smart and beautiful — she was like a real girl! She was a very special creation.”

“How do you smuggle a self-aware AI into Brith, anyway? I’ve not encountered anything like her before,” asked Cyrus.

“I’m not sure. There are very set rules for COGs and the new AI director runs a tight operation. But the previous guy-in-charge, Daniel, he was a complete maverick, and a royal jerk.”

“How so?”

“He’d just be doing his own experiments using company time and resource. I got into a big argument with him once. I had a pile of work on, and he tried to get me to renovate this building... some obscure keep in an even more obscure town. It wasn’t even related to one of the narratives. The whole thing blew up... it reached the highest levels; the Chief Creative Officer was practically duking it out with the Chief Tech Officer about how Daniel was wasting our time. It got so nasty. We had an office sweepstake about who would win.”

“And what happened?” Cyrus was genuinely interested, he found office politics fascinating having never really worked in that sort of environment.

“Well, eventually Daniel left the company, or was pushed. You can never tell with these things. He also just had the worst fashion sense in the world. Turning up in silver pants and tie-dye shirts... and he thought he had taste. I don’t know how anyone could be so smart and so stupid at the same time. But maybe I’m just being bitchy.”

“Anyway, I wouldn’t be surprised if COGs like Ava were created under his watch. He didn’t care much for company policy, they only put up with him because he was such a talented programmer.”

“Yes, but I thought only John Harmon had created self-aware AI’s. You know Harmon Industries, ‘Harmonising Technology.’”

“Someone like Scotty Garrett could have hired Harmon. You can do anything when you’re that loaded. I heard he even went on a privately funded space jaunt once,” replied Everett tweaking his moustache.

John Harmon was the world’s leading expert on Artificial Intelligence and his company, Harmon Industries, monopolised the high end of the market. He was the only specialist whose creations had been officially recorded at 7.0 on the Turing scale. The main point of difference was his patented ‘micro-synaptic architecture,’ which was in many ways, a more efficient version of the human brain. His AIs were regularly entrusted to run companies, make governmental decisions, and run military operations. They performed their duties with supreme efficiency and minimal waste. John was once quoted as saying, “We are close to the technology singularity. A time when artificial intelligence can redesign itself at an exponential rate far beyond what human engineers could achieve, thus creating artificial intellects undreamt of. Surpassing 9.0 on the Turing scale will likely trigger this event.” When asked if Artificial Intelligence would ever pose a threat to human existence, he responded, “I’m not sure if

humans are intelligent enough to answer that. In all likelihood, we'd need an AI to make that assessment."

Cyrus and Everett had been travelling off road for some time now. Between them and Tolwich lay the Falkirk swamp and the land was becoming progressively wetter as they continued east. It wasn't long before the ground gave way to a bog.

"Maybe we should head back to the road. This is only going to get worse. And I don't know how easy it'll be to get through that swampy forest up ahead," said Cyrus whose boots were sinking at least an inch with every step.

"What's a little mud on the shoes?" replied Everett trying to sound cheerful, "Anyone looking for us will take the main road, it's too risky."

Night was falling as the two entered the outskirts of the forest wetlands. A thick mist arose as a cacophony of owl hoots and insect sounds filled the air. Conveniently, the moon was still at the peak of its cycle and provided enough light for them to find solid footing as they navigated the tricky terrain.

Cyrus and Everett had just reached a small lake, which was far brighter than the rest of the swamp for the reflected moonlight on the rising vapours. Making their way around the muddy banks, they came to a halt when the sounds of the swamp abruptly ceased.

"Why'd everything go quiet?" asked Cyrus.

"I don't know. There could be some sort of apex predator nearby," whispered Everett trying to sound spooky, "Have you heard the tale of the Dentist of Falkirk? They say he was a former Simpson Valley serial killer."

"This entire place is filled with bad horror tropes already; you don't need to add to it with your urban legends. Coming here was an utterly miserable idea," complained Cyrus.

As if to emphasise Everett's words, the dark outline of a tall figure emerged from the fog before them. The man seemed to be staring in

their direction framed by tortured looking trees. He remained still, as if waiting for them to approach.

“Well, that’s a bit creepy,” said Cyrus, “What do you suppose he wants?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask him?” replied Everett.

“Strange men in swamps are generally not great conversationalists,” said Cyrus indignantly, “Who knows where he’s been. It was your idea; you should talk to him. He’ll probably turn into a werewolf and swallow you whole.”

“A vampire more likely.”

“Werewolves are more common in wetlands. Care to make a wager?” persisted Cyrus.

“Done.” replied Everett.

They shook hands to seal the deal as the stranger looked on. Cyrus turned to the tall figure, “Nice evening to be wandering the swamp,” he said casually, “You don’t happen to be some sort of nefarious creature out to feast on our souls?”

The man walked forward, he wore dark green robes, a broad brimmed hat and carried a pipe in one hand. A full beard covered his face, “Actually, I’m a Druid. Sol,” he said with a slight tip of his hat.

“Oh god, it’s a shrub rooter. That’s even worse,” whispered Everett.

The Druid observed them silently, taking a drag on his lit pipe before speaking.

“Are you Cyrus and Everett?”

The two exchanged a bewildered look.

“What if we were?” questioned Cyrus with his hand straying towards the hilt of his sword.

“No need to be on edge, I’m only here to ask a few questions. You see, I’m writing about a few unusual happenings in Brith. I’m sure you’ve heard about what happened to Edmund Blessed by now.”



“Not just heard! We were there, right next to him, when it happened!” offered Everett enthusiastically, “He was selling us on Virtualism when suddenly this crystal thing comes floating into the tavern, and I’m like, ‘Whoa, he’s really got a cool act going,’ then he grabs it saying, ‘This is some sort of gift from the god engineers’ or something like that, and he disappeared in a flash of light. It was totally out there.”

The Druid fixed an intense stare at Everett, absorbing every word of the story. He then removed a notepad and started scrawling with a pencil.

“Then one of those Virtualists started saying ‘He’s been taken up,’ and they all started singing this sad song. Man, it was a weird moment.”

“And what happened, after?”

“Well, we left, it was all getting a bit too religious for us,” interjected Cyrus.

“You’re not religious yourselves, then?” asked the Druid with a raised eyebrow.

“God no! I’m a physicist!” said Cyrus mortified.

“Interesting,” returned Sol nodding his head as if in understanding, “So, you had no feelings towards Blessed one way or the other?”

“No, I just met him. Sure, I think religion is silly but his was better than some. I heard he might have been murdered by hackers, though,” said Cyrus remembering one of his mum’s theories, “At least that’s what they’re saying on some news channels. And it seems a bit coincidental, that weird floating crystal thing and then he dies in real life.”

“That’s impossible though. The Virtech® has safeguards, you can’t do real harm to anyone in cyberspace...” Everett seemed about to say more, but his thoughts were interrupted by a sudden noise, which caught the attention of all three. Heavy footsteps were moving towards them splashing through the swamp.

“Well, that’s got to be the werewolf, now. The bet’s still on,” said Cyrus drawing his sword. Everett drew several throwing daggers and looked intently in the direction of the sound. Only Sol didn’t ready himself for battle and instead casually took a few puffs of his pipe.

“Err...we might need your help. Are you just a writer, or you got some Druidic mojo to spare?” asked Everett.

“Hmm,” pondered Sol. Combat wasn’t his thing, but he did have one Druidic spell at his disposal, if he could just remember it, “I might have something,” he murmured as he began mouthing the words, trying to recall the correct pronunciation.

A hunched man approached through the fog, wearing tattered clothes and shoes. His skin was pale, eyes shadowed, and his hair a tangled mess matted with mud and leaves. He came to a stop ten feet away.

Cyrus brandished his sword at the newcomer, “Hello? Can we help you?”

The stranger didn’t react.

“He doesn’t look very friendly, does he?” Cyrus whispered to Everett.

Sol quietly muttered an incantation to himself, whilst tracing strange symbols in the air. He was clearly not well practiced at it. The stranger stared at him unmoving, then turned his gaze to Everett and Cyrus.

The man was suddenly seized by a series of spasmodic movements. His limbs convulsed and his head was flung back. An opening appeared in his chest and skeletal limbs emerged. Two long razor-like legs popped out of its arms and something resembling a human skull emerged through an opening in its head. The human skin was cast to the ground revealing the creature’s spider like structure. It had six legs, and at least two smaller ones attached to a two-sectioned body. Yellow venom dripped from two large fangs on its skeletal face.

“Well, that’s put me off dinner,” said Cyrus, his sword quivering as he held it out in front of him, “What is that thing?”

“It’s a skin creeper,” murmured Everett, “They crawl inside the skins of their victims to disguise themselves whilst they hunt their next prey. But they don’t just attack anyone... we haven’t done anything bad, have we?”

“Uh, remember we kind of borrowed those barrels,” said Cyrus placing himself between the creeper and the others.

Everett tossed his throwing knives at the creature and immediately regretted it. Two were turned away by its hard exoskeleton but one lodged between the joints of its shoulder, which was enough to successfully irritate it. The beast reared with a demonic screech and stabbed its sharp forelegs like spears at Cyrus.

“Who created this thing?” questioned Cyrus, “It’s utterly ridiculous! Something like this could never evolve naturally,” he said, as a razor-sharp limb swept through the air close enough for him to hear the whoosh of the air it displaced.

Biology, however, was not Cyrus’ strong suit. Scientists had in fact run thousands of evolutionary simulations in cyberspace. Single celled organisms would be evolved in virtual habitats, both terrestrial and alien. Powered by a Quantum Unified Integrated Supercomputer, billions of years of evolution could be achieved in weeks. It was discovered that life could essentially take on any form imaginable if the environmental conditions and eco system allowed.

The game designers at Arctik didn’t muck about trying to create their own monsters. Instead, they licensed the evolutionary software, and populated their own artificial habitat with many traditional creatures from folklore such as goblins, dragons and elves. They then simulated the evolution of new creatures amongst that competitive set. Thousands of new unique species emerged, which saved the game designers a great deal of time. The skin creeper was the great-great-grand spawn of an ordinary garden spider, through

billions of years of evolution. They had been cast in game as a form of karmic retribution, some might say disproportionately.

Sol, now sure of his wording, began loudly reciting the incantation he'd been rehearsing. Both Everett and Cyrus backed away hopeful that whatever the Druid was doing would make a difference. Druidic powers were useful in a swamp. He could easily wrap this thing up in vines at the very least.

With a wave of his hand, Sol completed his spell. The air instantly turned a putrid green, carrying with it the most unholy odour imaginable. Rotten eggs and used diapers had nothing on this, it was a whole new level of rancid. The creeper, who was at ground zero of the gas explosion, instantly went flaccid, its legs buckling as it inhaled.

As soon as it hit Cyrus and Everett's nostrils, they were quite violently ill. Breathing was torture as they both gasped, coughed and sputtered on the ground. They had just enough of their wits to attempt to stagger to the edge of the green mist. Dragging themselves some forty feet away, the air cleared enough that they could run towards the road.

"Oh god, that was vile!" coughed Cyrus.

The creeper was starting to shake off the effects. Completely ignoring the Druid still gagging on the ground, it stumbled forward screeching in pursuit.

"Any ideas how we kill this thing?" wheezed Cyrus, but Everett simply shook his head, still too dazed to talk.

The skin creeper was gaining rapidly, its spindly legs were far better for ploughing through the wetlands than boots. It was almost upon them when the sound of hooves caught Everett's attention. An armoured rider on a white horse came bearing down, sword drawn.

Everett leaped to the side to avoid a collision and bowled over Cyrus. The horse sped past them towards the skin creeper as the

rider skilfully manoeuvred in and lopped off one of the creature's limbs.

The creeper quickly recovered, thrusting its pointed forearms at both the rider and their mount as they navigated around the beast, dodging and parrying blows.

The beast was simply outclassed as the rider came about again and again, taking limbs off with each pass. Everett gaped as he witnessed a seldom seen level of skill.

Once the creature was immobilised, the mounted assailant charged in delivering a kill stroke that split the creature's head down the middle.

"Run!" shouted Everett as he helped Cyrus up, "They're probably after the tome."

The rider, now satisfied the creature was dead, closed in fast on the two as they attempted to flee. The horse slowed to ride alongside them. Everett and Cyrus came to a halt, exhausted from the chase. They weren't dead yet, which was an encouraging sign, but it seemed likely they were going to have to give up their prize.

"You managed to get yourselves into a lot of trouble," came a familiar voice with a touch of mirth. They fell back on the ground from fatigue and squinted up through the dark at their saviour.

It was Ava.



## CHAPTER 18

### LUNT

**“The same thing** happened to Edmund Blessed, the founder of Virtualism,” said Cyrus sombrely. They had made a small campfire at the edge of the swamplands, hidden from the main road.

“We were there when it happened. We found out later he’d died from a heart attack, it can’t be coincidence,” he finished with a glance towards Everett. This time his friend didn’t challenge the possibility.

“Nothing happens by chance in Brith. There are strings being pulled everywhere in this place. People are funnelled one way or another, you may think you’re in charge of your destiny here, but the game has its own agenda,” said Ava, “I’ve been here long enough to work that out, at least.”

“Well, we were near two different victims when they died, I wonder if that makes us suspects?” said Cyrus.

“You two didn’t have anything to do with their deaths, did you?” asked Ava abruptly.

“No. Of course not! Scotty Garret is one of the men I admired most,” replied Everett as sincerely as he could.

Ava considered for a second. Seemingly satisfied with his answer, she replied, “I didn’t think so. You don’t seem very threatening.”

“Well, we try to be approachable...” began Everett suddenly feeling a little emasculated.

“I’m sure, but I mean that it’s almost impossible for me to see you as a threat,” finished Ava.

Ava had good reason to believe Everett. It was becoming exceedingly difficult to pass lies. Lying in real life was entirely

pointless thanks to both Retinal Quantum Lenses and the various AI driven apps, which could be installed for them. PantsonFire Pty Ltd, was one such application developer. Their AI engine could analyze tone of voice, inflection and bodily reactions/movement to detect lies with 97.4% accuracy. Lying in VR was harder to distinguish. Whilst many of the tell-tale signs still translated, masking apps were also available, most notably, StoneFace, which was 'guaranteed to disguise all sorts of bollocks,' or so their marketing claimed. In response to the rise of such programs, PantsonFire's CEO, Steve Rhodie, confidently asserted that their next generation app would be able to penetrate the growing number of masking products on the market. It turned out he lied.

Fortunately, many environments like Brith disallowed third party apps altogether as they could be used to gain an advantage over other players. These were easily detected, and players faced an instant lifetime cheating ban. Ava, however, had a kind of lie detection built into her matrix and she knew immediately that Everett was telling the truth, or at least believed he was. For Ava, this simply translated as a 'gut feeling.'

"There's definitely a connection between these two murders," said Ava. She was assessing all possibilities.

"That Druid was after information about Edmund Blessed, too. I wonder how he found us?" pondered Cyrus,

"And I wonder what happened to him? That toxic cloud was totally bogus. It's like he was trying to get us killed... or maybe he didn't know what he was doing," Everett shrugged.

"We should keep moving east," Ava suggested as she commenced packing up their campsite, which prompted the others to follow suit.

"What's east for you?" asked Everett.

There was a long silence from Ava as she saddled up, "I don't know..." she finally replied, "...but I'm hoping there'll be some answers. It's just a feeling."



The feeling was persistent and inexplicable to Ava. Her white mare walked at a leisurely pace so that Cyrus and Everett could keep up on foot. They were all heading in the same direction for now.

“Scotty didn’t let you outside the castle, did he?” asked Cyrus.

“He did initially, but it caused problems. And back then I was still learning human interactions. I didn’t know how fraught it was. I thought a lot of the strange behaviours going around were simply attempts to be friendly,” she replied.

“I’m surprised you stuck around that long, being locked away,” said Everett.

“It was my duty. Duty is a fundamental part of my programming. I don’t think I could have done anything different,” Ava sighed, “I’m as much a puppet in Brith as everyone else.”

“You’re remarkably self-aware... you’ve got a better understanding of yourself than most people,” commented Cyrus, “...do you know who programmed you?”

Ava shrugged, “No, Lord\_Scottish never mentioned who built my matrix. I think he always saw me as his own creation. But I’m sure he had help; Al wasn’t his field.”

“You seem very real to me,” said Everett looking closely at Ava.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said with a smile.

“I’ve been wondering if you feel emotions?” he continued.

“I do, but I don’t know if it’s the same way you feel.”

“How do you feel about Lord\_Scottish?” asked Everett, “His death, I mean.”

It wasn’t the most sensitive of questions and Ava looked at him, trying to discern his intent. Seeing only a curiosity, she said, “I feel sadness and anger. And something else. Guilt maybe? That I couldn’t save him.”

“Do you have other emotions?”

“Of course, I do, I have all the emotions you do,” she said, a flicker of annoyance creased her brow, “Why all the questions?”

“It’s just,” began Everett, “It’s just that you’re amazing, and I’ve never met anyone like you.”

Ava smiled at him and Everett turned away, his face flushing. *Don’t fall for her, don’t fall for her, don’t fall for her*, he repeated like a mantra in his head.

They were now travelling the main road. Cyrus and Everett felt much safer in Ava’s company. She was handy in a tight spot. Quite a number of people were on the road, both players and COGs. There were a few friendly ‘hellos,’ and some talk of sickness in town, but for the most part, the passers-by could have been categorised as *lunt*.

*Lunt* was a term initially used to describe the people at a party of no consequence. There was you, your friends, anyone you were interested in getting to know, people you actively avoided, and the rest were the *lunt*. It had now been appropriated to refer to players and COGs of no consequence in any virtual environment. Thomas Tork, a cyberengineer claimed to have first used the phrase to describe cyberspace inhabitants in a memo to Arctik Studios. The message meant for a co-worker, was accidentally sent to all staff. The term took on a life of its own and filtered through to become part of the cybervernacular. It’s now in common usage by *lunt* everywhere.

It was late afternoon when a group of five riders travelling from the west caught up to Cyrus, Everett and Ava. They wore gleaming plate mail and bore uniform shields with heraldic symbols. Their leader rode forward as they approached from behind. He lifted his visor to reveal perfectly handsome features on a square jawed face. The knight cleared his throat loudly to catch everyone’s attention.

“Greetings, travellers. We are from the Order of the Seraphim and I am Count\_Alymere.”

Cyrus and Everett offered a polite, 'Hello' but the knight ignored them. He seemed more interested in talking to Ava, whom he had deemed their leader.

Ava brought her steed around to face the group of knights, "Good day. What news from the west?" she asked in polite tones.

"These are dangerous times, my lady," he said with a grim smile, "Thieves roam the land as do our sworn enemies, the Order of the Dark Flame. In fact, an object of value has gone missing." His serious manner suddenly gave way to a charming smile.

"Perhaps you've encountered it. It's a book of academic importance, written in Ancient Aergothian. I fear for those who carry it, though. Should the Dark Crusaders find them, they would surely suffer a dire fate."

"What sort of fate would that be?" asked Ava with a touch of mirth.

"Something horrible I imagine," said Alymere with a wry tone, "Probably torture and death, maybe even worse."

"A fate worse than torture and death? That sounds quite awful," quipped Ava.

Alymere continued, his smile slipping "Have you seen a book like the one I described?"

Cyrus gave a sideways glance to Everett who remained eyes down.

"I've not heard of anything like it," replied Ava.

"If you come across the bearers of such an item, please reach out to us, we have knights stationed in all towns in the area. We would offer our protection and reward for its recovery."

Even as Alymere said the words, Ava was getting another sudden gut feeling. Her eyes narrowed, "Of course, you would," she replied tersely.

"And what brings you out on the roads?" asked the knight.

“We travel east. My lord in Skara Brae has passed away, I believe he was murdered. I travel east to find answers,” Ava said with a blunt tone.

“Very well then. I wish you luck in your quest. We will be on our way.”

With a signal from Alymere, the knights rode east around the group. Alymere remained behind.

“So, you were in the service of Lord\_Scottish? Why do you not attend his funeral? It is a grand affair. They are holding it in the town square and building a memorial for him. The Bards of Aerynhall were even doing an encore performance at his wake.”

Funerals for key figures on Brith were often big deals. The wake held for Edmund Blessed in Roh had attracted thousands of his followers and many more casual observers. The largest ever send off in Brith belonged to the former number one player, Roman\_the\_Razor or Walter Casey as he was known in reality. He had died from a freak cardiac arrest many years ago, shortly after slaying the High Cleric of Abraxus, a cult leader who was thought to be the most cunning and Machiavellian villain ever created in game.

Over half a million players attended the funeral. It featured a full orchestra, a carefully choreographed performance, in addition to a colourful five-mile parade through the streets of the Twin Cities of Orsus. Roman\_the\_Razor was celebrated as the most popular personality in Brith of his day. Oddly enough, his alter ego, Walter Casey, lived by himself and had no close family or friends. His funeral was a small affair attended only by a distant cousin.

“As I said, I believe my lord, was murdered and I travel seeking answers,” Ava said, becoming impatient.

“Of course, my apologies,” Alymere bowed from atop his horse.

“Before I go, my lady, can I make one last inquiry? Your servant...” he said with a gesture to Cyrus, “...what do you carry in you backpack? It appears to be a book.”

"I'm not a servant and it is a book," Cyrus said guardedly, "A spell book we are taking to a friend."

"Ah, taking it to a friend. They are lucky to have such accommodating associates. If it's not too much trouble, may I please see this book?"

Cyrus paused looking at the knight, then Everett uncertainly. Seeing Alymere raise an eyebrow at the delay, he removed his backpack and started to unbuckle the straps.

"He has said it's a spell book, Sir Knight. Why do you require to see it?" Ava interrupted with a dangerous edge, which was thankfully enough diversion for Cyrus to pause his activities.

"My lady, it occurs to me that someone unfamiliar with Ancient Aergothian may mistake the historical book for something else... like a spell book."

"Is it a spell book?" asked Ava with a glance to Cyrus.

Cyrus nodded slowly.

"Yes, a Druidic spell book," added Everett saying the first thing that popped into his head, "For our friend, Sol." Details were always important with these sorts of exchanges.

"There you go. He says it's a spell book," said Ava flatly.

"Still, it would reassure me immensely if I could see it," said Alymere persistently.

"Enough!" declared Ava, "You overestimate your authority, Count\_Alymere, and have overstayed your welcome. Lord Scottish, my lord and mentor died today. He was the best of men, and the kindest. And you accuse us of stopping to steal some book as we try to find answers?"

There was a moment of tense silence as Alymere and Ava's wills vied for dominance. Alymere wasn't accustomed to being challenged. His jaw clenched, and for a moment it seemed he was going to escalate the matter. Then, unexpectedly, his lips parted in a

broad smile, "Of course, my lady. Forgive the intrusion. You have my condolences. I'll be on my way." He gave a quick nod to all three before riding to re-join his colleagues.

Once he was out of sight, Ava turned to Cyrus and Everett, "So, you have the book he's looking for. Care to fill me in on what's going on?"

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *The Moaning Death has been released in many population centres. This will clear out the lunt allowing us to repopulate where necessary with COGs, which are both relevant and essential to our new storylines.*

*This of course poses no threat to players, third parties and key narrative AIs. However, to improve the realism of the response, we have fed real world data based on human responses to such a crisis, and our COGs have successfully processed the information. Already, some of the more autonomous amongst them are responding in unexpected ways to the crisis.*

*Live to play!*





## CHAPTER 19

### TOLWICH

**Wang watched with** fascination as Vanja expertly cut elaborate patterns into a parchment with her knife. With almost everything easily manufactured with 3D fabricators, hand crafted goods had become a sought-after luxury. Almost everyone had hidden craft skills. Vanja was quite a skilled paper cutter, able to create complex and beautiful paper sculptures. Her talent was amplified even more in cyberspace, with her increased precision and dexterity.

“I don’t understand how we could have missed them,” said Wang as he gulped his ale, “They had arrived in Tolwich early this morning. No one had seen any sign of the two they were after.”

“They must have gone off-road, they’ll be here soon enough. Lyrax College is the only place for miles where they might be able to get a translation done,” replied Vanja confidently as she folded the cut parchment into a complicated lotus shaped structure.

The two had a clear view of the road into town from the tavern window. The streets of Tolwich were empty, which would make any visitors easy to spot. A plague had hit the city. It was one of several devices used periodically in game to remove legacy COGs that were no longer required. New inhabitants would soon arrive in town, replacing the fallen, and bringing new information relevant to the current narratives.

The event posed no real danger to players, and plagues were considered something of a novelty. Contagious diseases had all but disappeared in the real world, and not from breakthroughs in medical science, although there had been many. It was largely down to the isolationist behaviour of the cybergeneration. Even the common cold had become a rarity.

“If Count\_Alymere gets it first, what do we do?” asked Wang.

“I think we have to prevent that happening. He’d be difficult to defeat with the Seraphim behind him.”

“Speak of the devil,” whispered Wang, “I thought we’d lost them.”

A small contingent of Seraphim knights were riding into town, “Alymere’s with them.” sighed Wang, “We may need to try a different approach.”

Wang and Vanja made their way down a series of alleyways to Lyrax, taking the quieter route so as to remain unnoticed. They needn’t have bothered, given how quiet the streets were.

Tolwich was an academic town, and the privately owned and funded Lyrax Academy was the greatest learning centre in the land. Many would travel there seeking to study history, language and theory as it related to the realms of Brith. It had turned out to be quite a money spinner for its investors. Its founder, Marcus Johnson was one of the wealthiest men in the realms.

The academy was a grand building designed in the gothic style. It was both immense and intricate, putting the likes of real-world buildings such as Notre-Dame and Canterbury Cathedral to shame. Building works had commenced on a wall surrounding the structure but it was far from complete.

Security seemed a priority, unnecessarily so for a college, and near the entrance were six pike wielding guards who eyed Wang and Vanja suspiciously.

“Greetings, good sirs. We require the help of a language expert,” began Wang in his usual pleasant manner, “Friends of ours will be arriving soon to get a book translated.”

“Buzz off yer loiter-sack. The master ain’t seein’ no’un today,” said a particularly large, ugly guard as he chewed on an apple.

“Loiter-sack? You could use a few language lessons yourself. Rude man,” retorted Wang huffily. The guard seemed unwilling to make

further eye contact, considering the matter closed, which only sent Wang into more of a flap.

“We are here on a matter of utmost importance,” Vanja interceded, “If it helps, we are willing to donate to your cause.” She removed a bag full of coins. Vanja obviously spoke in a way the guards understood, and they gathered around with interest. Bribery still worked in most parts of Brith.

“Let them through,” came a voice from inside, which sent the guards scuttling back to their posts. A man dressed in robes stood within the darkened hallway. He was in his mid-thirties, tall, thin and clean-shaven with the sort of sharp features that expressed a keen intelligence.

“Follow me,” he said to the two and proceeded to lead them down a series of grand arched corridors lit by lanterns. Stopping by a solid wooden door, he removed a large iron key, and entered. The room was cosy and lined with bookshelves. Light streamed in through a small latticed window, which did little to brighten the space. The man positioned himself behind a large desk near the far wall and gestured to two uncomfortable looking chairs before seating himself.

“I’m the school master. What can I do for you?”

“Good sir,” began Wang trying awkwardly to settle himself into the chair, “I’m Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, Knight of the Golden Order and this is my companion, Vanja, a Rider of Crad. We seek your most excellent academic services. Is there anyone at the college capable of translating a tome in Ancient Aergothian?”

“Apart from myself, yes, there are several,” said the man, “If you wish to engage our professional services that can be arranged.”

“Not just yet,” interjected Vanja, “We are waiting for the tome to arrive, we are expecting acquaintances to be here soon.”

“This isn’t by chance, the Tome of Leto? I heard it had gone missing,” said the man with an intense gaze as he scrutinised the

two. Vanja and Wang exchanged a glance at the master's foreknowledge.

"There is little of significance happening on Brith that escapes my notice. There are few in the land who can translate that book. It seemed likely it would make its way to Lyrax. This is an exciting opportunity for all of us. A chance to solve one of the greatest mysteries of Brith," the school master continued undeterred.

"Is it? And what would that be?" asked Wang, a little perplexed.

"To find out what exactly the *Neverborn* is, of course," said the college master.

"What, so the Neverborn is actually a thing? I just thought it was a cool name..." asked Vanja curiously, after a pause.

"The Tome will answer that. But I already have some basic knowledge from beyond cyberspace."

"You can see outside Brith? You're not a COG?" asked Wang surprised.

"On the contrary. I am amongst the most cognisant of COGs, or at least one of only a few self-aware AI's on Brith. I was named Bertrand by my creator, but most call me the Polymath. I was custom designed to run this private institution, but I can access data compiled from the real world too."

"So, what do you know about it?"

The Polymath was a formidable intellect who oversaw both the education curriculum and led a team of scholars who recorded emerging Brith knowledge. Everything from the legends of the elves, new research into magical fabrication techniques and even the latest Brith memes were recorded in rows of leather-bound volumes.

"Well, in relation to Brith history, we don't yet have all the answers, that's where the Tome of Leto comes in. But within the narrative structure of the game, it is the final challenge... the biggest threat that Brith will ever face. It was the brainchild of Spinks. I believe the

*Neverborn's* true nature is the single most guarded secret in the company."

The Polymath and his team had easily recognised the patterns shaping Brith. Plagues led to severe economic downturn, which in turn led to poverty, intolerance and eventually conflict. War was being engineered on a grand scale, that much was certain. A doubling of college security had been ordered, and construction had begun on fortifications around the school grounds.

"Fascinating," said Wang, "Is there a place we could wait until our friends arrive?"

"Of course, academic quarters can be issued to paying customers. I shall make arrangements with the provost. If you'll be so kind as to follow."

Wang nudged Vanja as they accompanied the Polymath down the hallway, "This is bigger than I thought. You know I have a healthy imagination for big things." Vanja rolled her eyes, "Don't get too excited, we don't have the book yet."



## CHAPTER 20

### LYRAX

**It was approaching** evening when Ava, Cyrus and Everett reached Tolwich. Ava had received an account of events leading up to their visit to Skara Brae, and had agreed to accompany the two direct to the Lyrax Academy.

There were several mass graves on the outskirts of town and the streets of Tolwich were all but empty. No shops were permitted to open whilst the Moaning Death was sweeping through the area. Only the tavern remained trading with essential food supplies. There did, however, appear to be a substantial number of Seraphim knights on the streets. Cyrus had spotted at least twenty on patrol as they made their way towards the central district.

“This place is crawling with Seraphim. What’s the collective noun for knights? A troupe?” asked Cyrus.

“A clank, surely,” replied Everett.

“It’s a banner of knights,” said Ava as they rounded into the central plaza.

In the town square, a group had gathered on the steps of the mayor’s office, waving fists in the air and loudly repeating the phrase, “Homes are broken, Tolwich reopen.” A series of messages such as “We will not be brainwashed” and “We’re moaning about our livelihoods, not sickness,” were displayed on crudely painted wooden boards.

Cyrus approached them cautiously, “Good evening,” he said a little put out by their aggressive manner, “Would you know where the Lyrax Academy is?”

“Why would you want to talk to those deceitful frauds?” replied a large, sweaty, bearded fellow, “Their sort of elitist dogma only serves to enable a social and economic class disparity that will ultimately lead to the downfall of society.”

“Okay...” began Cyrus who wasn’t sure how to proceed, “...but we’re from out of town and we just need something translated.”

“It’s over there,” the man said dismissively, pointing to a large gothic building about a five-minute walk away, “But are you aware of the plight of Tolwich? The mayor has enforced a shutdown based on a fraudulent mistruth. The livelihoods of thousands are being destroyed, and...” he lowered his voice, “...through my deep and insightful understanding of all matters political, I have done a very thorough and methodical analysis of all available facts relative to the current calamity. All of, which unequivocally demonstrates that there is not, and never was any real evidence, of a ‘new and deadly disease’ going around town. The Moaning Death is a falsehood.”

“It’s not real?” asked Cyrus. He knew enough about Brith epidemics to know the dynamics of the contagion spread was extremely selective. Plagues had swept Brith before, but these protestors were a new development.

“Yes, such are the conclusions I’ve reached. That’s why my comrades and I are exercising our right to free speech!” the man continued, “we’ve been out here all day and none of us are sick. I’ve been in close proximity to victims and there is no sign of a contagion, therefore providing definitive proof on the matter,” he declared wiping away perspiration from his forehead, “There’s clearly an artful deception at work here. A malicious totalitarian agenda to seize power through oppression. The mayor is undeniably profiting through an alliance with foreign merchants. He’s in receipt of financial benefits from imported goods.”

“Do you have any proof of this? And what about the people who have died? Those mass graves outside of town didn’t look fake to me,” said Cyrus.



“They’ve put poison in the water supply, just don’t drink the water and you’re fine,” another protestor chimed in, “These elite’s think they can pull the wool over our eyes, but we’re not sheep.” He put a finger to his head, “They don’t think we have enough brains to think for ourselves.”

The large, bearded protestor continued enthusiastically, “Well said, brother! They may think us weak and naive, but we’ll forcefully oppose such naked tyranny and authoritarian forces to our last breath.” The entire group cheered vehemently in agreement.

“You don’t say,” said Cyrus slowly edging away, “Well, I’m going to re-join my friends over there. Bit of a rush, I’m afraid, but good luck with that.”

The protestors were the unexpected result of feeding real world data on the ASTROVID-42 shutdown to synaptic networks. Actual events attracted quite a number of outlandish theories, which were contrary to the evidence at hand. The leading hypothesis was that government policies were being influenced by alien intelligence as a forerunner to invasion. This belief was reinforced by the name of the virus, ‘ASTROVID-42’, which was a dead giveaway. It did not occur to anyone that ‘Astro’ was the term of an actual family of viruses and not a reference to outer space. Those people who did fall sick were perceived as victims of an engineered cyberspace related illness. The entire cybernet, after all, was built on reverse engineered alien technology, or so the theory went.

Not unexpectedly, protestors breaking lockdown were amongst the first victims of the pathogen.

Upon arrival at the college, Cyrus and company were unexpectedly expected, “You’re the ‘uns with the book needin’ translation?” asked the guard as they approached.

Cyrus, could only manage a nod, with a glance back towards Ava and Everett who both shrugged, “The Master’s waitin’ for yer. Wait’n the lecture room, down the corridor and to yer left.” Everett exchanged a confused glance with the others as they entered,

“How’d he know we were coming? This Polymath seems to know an awful lot.” The corridor soon opened into a large room occupied by two long desks with benches that ran the length of the space.

“Well, I guess we wait,” said Ava taking a seat at the end of one of the benches and sliding into the middle.

“This desk isn’t very practical, is it? If a student in the middle needed to go to the bathroom, all the students would need to get up for them to leave. Bad interior design, obviously done by a third party,” observed Everett, “I’d never design anything like this.”

“I don’t think medieval students were ever allowed to leave a classroom. I’ve read they faced very harsh learning conditions,” said Cyrus.

“You know,” said Everett turning to Ava, “Brith is probably the most fun location, but there are better designed and more beautiful places in Cyberspace. There’s cybermon and New Eden. One day, if we can get you out of here, I’d take you to visit some of those places.”

“I might take you up on that offer,” Ava smiled at Everett and he suddenly felt the need to take a seat himself.

“Someone’s coming,” said Cyrus hearing footsteps approaching from the hallway. The three stood quickly, trying to arrange themselves respectably.

Two figures appeared through the arched entrance much to the surprise of Everett and Cyrus.

“Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, Knight of the Golden Order, at your service,” said the familiar looking knight bowing low “...and my companion is Vanja, an Elite Rider of Crad. We were briefly acquainted at Leto’s Tomb.”

“I’m Ava, and this is Everett and Cyrus,” said Ava with a nod towards her companions who were wearing mildly horrified expressions.

“Ah, Cyrus and Everett, you led us on quite a merry chase. It was completely unnecessary; we would have certainly negotiated with

you over the Tome. From what we've learned from the Master here, it unlocks vital information about the *Neverborn*. It's an asset of value to every player on Brith. If we can come to an arrangement, we'd like to hear the translation with you."

"If there are new journeys that stem from the book, we are happy to divide and conquer. We can work together," added Vanja.

It sounded reasonable enough to Cyrus, but Everett wasn't about to let his greatest achievement go so easily, "We retrieved the book and we know it's value. Why should we share?" he asked dourly.

"You won't last long in the Meta-game without help. It's a harsh and unforgiving world," said Wang trying to sound concerned for their welfare.

"He's right, even Meta-players need all the assistance they can get. Players of lesser stature shouldn't even attempt the global narrative. Your abilities are too puny for the challenges ahead," chimed in Vanja.

"Puny?" Everett questioned indignantly.

Ava laughed, "I did say you weren't especially threatening."

"The translation fee is high; this is a privately owned institution. We are willing to pay the thirty thousand Brith Gold they are asking and as much again in compensation," Vanja continued, "You won't get a better offer."

It sounded pretty good on paper. Cyrus could use the cash and would have agreed on the spot, but Everett's sullen expression seemed to turn a shade more sullen, if that was possible.

"Puny," repeated Everett, sulking, just as the Polymath entered from the hallway.

"Good evening," he said, his gaze sweeping the room. A small crease appeared between the brows momentarily as his gaze fell on Ava, but he quickly reverted to his usual composed demeanour, "Welcome to the Lyrax Academy," he continued, "I am the Polymath

and Master of the school. If you have the tome ready, we can translate it for the agreed fee. May I see it?"

Cyrus removed the heavy volume from his backpack and handed it to the Polymath, who proceeded to flick through it.

"It's about the length I expected. It'll be most efficient if I translate this myself, I should be done in a few hours. I can begin at once if it suits you."

"Well of course you'd agree to it, surely," said Wang with a look to Everett from whom he sensed the most resistance.

There was a long silence whilst the room waited for Everett to give a go ahead. Finally, Cyrus spoke up, "Yes, we agree to all terms," he said to the Master and also glanced at Vanja and Wang to show his support for their proposal. They returned a nod in acknowledgement.

"Very well, I shall get started at once," said the Polymath taking the book to the lecture desk at the end of the room. He removed a blank book from under the table, placed the Tome of Leto above it, and began writing with perfect, flowing script.

"He doesn't waste time, does he," said Everett forgetting his misgivings, momentarily mesmerised by the speed of the Master's work. The Polymath finished the first page with immaculate lettering and moved onto the next.

Muffled sounds emanating from outside caught Wang's attention and he walked over to the window. He peered outside; it was getting dark, and it was difficult to see past the reflected lantern light of the room.

The sounds soon turned to voices shouting near the school grounds.

"They're making an awful racket," said Wang, "Probably those Seraphim knights causing trouble."

"I doubt it's the knights," returned Vanja listening closely, "this sounds like something altogether different."

Screams suddenly sounded, along with the clash of steel, which got everyone's attention. Vanja came to stand at the window beside her friend.

"Perhaps we should take a look," she said.

"It could be those protestors getting violent," offered Cyrus, "They had some interesting perspectives."

"Well, we can't see much from here... we'll be outside," said Wang as he made for the exit accompanied by Vanja.

"I'm coming, too," said Ava preparing to leave with the others. She turned to Cyrus and Everett, "You two, stay here and guard the Master." The room was soon silent except the scratching of the Polymath's quill and muffled sounds ranging from outside the building.

"So why so opposed to the deal?" asked Cyrus turning to Everett, once they were left alone, "It's a pretty good way forward," he said.

Everett sighed, "I guess, it's just... it was our once in a lifetime shot at the Meta... and maybe I just didn't like being called 'puny' in front of Ava," whispered Everett to Cyrus.

"If you're developing a crush on her, it's not going to end well."

"You don't need to worry about me," said Everett glumly.

Without glancing up or even ceasing his writing, the Polymath addressed them both, "Ava is a self-aware AI, very much like myself," he began, "I recognized it immediately, it seems we were built with a similarly structured base matrix. That much I can tell. I can offer this advice to you," he said looking up for a second to catch Everett's attention, "She is capable of deep emotion. But she is not a girl like you know. She will not quantify you by the expected measures, she has none of those biological drives. I sincerely doubt being 'puny' is going to disqualify you in this matter. Her affection would be a very pure thing, untainted by any human urges."

“So, what would get her attention?” asked Everett suddenly perking up.

“I can’t say, her matrix differs from mine in several important aspects,” continued the Polymath as he translated a page and moved onto the next in a seamless motion, “...but you can be certain of one thing, she has an undying sense of duty and loyalty. These look to be built into her core. If she’s your friend now, she will always be so. It would take a great deal to break that bond.”

Everett let out a heavy sigh, “Well, I guess eternal friend-zone is a good start.”

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *In addition to the pathogen culling population centres, the dead now rise to bring chaos to the realms of Brith.*

*As many of you are aware, the Moaning Death is the first of seven signs that will lead to the coming of the Neverborn. Whilst we originally planned a simple purge of COGs, the narrative team fell in love with the idea of zombies. Enjoy watching our players squirm as bedlam rules the land. They'll be losing their minds over this one.*

*Live to play!*





# CHAPTER 21

## THE MOANING DEATH

**Killing zombies wasn't** especially difficult. Even the inexperienced found them fairly easy to dispatch. What made it a challenge was the sheer numbers that they arrived in. They didn't just come at you, they swarmed at you. Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang had cut down seven single-handedly by the time they'd made it to the end of the street. Vanja had taken five, and Ava had blitzed through twelve.

"I can't believe they're doing a Zombie riot," said Wang as the undead poured in from every side street.

There were at least fifty zombies milling about the central plaza. Several Seraphim bodies lay torn apart, and it seemed the undead had discovered a feast on the town hall steps. Across the far side of the square, a single knight was surrounded by a mass of foes.

"Alymere," observed Vanja quietly to Wang.

Ava was the first to breach the plaza, smoothly whirling her sword in sweeping motions. Zombie limbs and heads flew through the air in her wake. Vanja and Wang proceeded more cautiously, it was dangerous fighting so many at once. The risk of being overwhelmed and dragged down was ever present in mass combat situations.

"That one looks like my fourth-grade teacher," said Wang casually running his sword through an elderly looking grey haired zombie's mouth, "I remember she had the nerve to call me self-absorbed."

A zombie lunged at Vanja, raking her back. Ava intervened efficiently lopping off its head with a swift slice, "Are you OK?" she asked Vanja who gave a quick nod.

"Of course, I'm OK," said Wang, "These things have barely touched me."

In the centre of the town square was a large statue of Tolwich founder, the Baroness Arabella. It stood upon a large square base elevated a metre above the ground. Ava blazed a trail there, "We can use the height of the platform as a barrier," she yelled to the others.

Vanja and Wang ran to join her, the high base was a definite strategic advantage against these sorts of foes who surged forward with little regard for personal safety. Seeing the others gather, Aymere proceeded to cut his way through from the far side of the plaza. The last remaining two dozen zombies surrounded them.

"This is an unlikely gathering," said Aymere as he sliced away skeletal hands reaching up to the platform, "I'm very glad to see all three of you. I didn't realize you knew each other."

"We just met," replied Wang, "fighting undead hordes makes for necessary bedfellows."

The four hacked and slashed at the four corners of the podium like a four bladed blender. Vanja cut down the last of them and hung her head wearily. She had been injured from the battle. Unlike her comrades who wore plate armour, Vanja wore leather, which had been compromised in several places. Ranged combat was more her thing, but arrows weren't especially effective against the undead, "There's going to be more," she breathed.

Aymere turned to the others, also a little winded, "How many graves were there on the edge of town? Did you see? Surely that's most of them."

"There were four mass graves..." said Wang, "...hundreds of bodies." Even as he spoke, they could here dozens of feet running on pavement towards them. Ava held her sword up high, shooting a bright white flame into the sky that expanded, filling the area with light. They could now clearly see a legion of reanimated corpses charging down the street towards the town square.

"Impressive," observed Wang, "We'll have to watch her."

“Caught your eye, has she? She’s very handy with that blade,” replied Vanja, coolly dispatching a zombie which continued writhing at her feet.

“You know she’s not my type,” replied Wang.

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“What’s that noise?” asked Cyrus as a terrific banging reverberated down the corridor, “It’s coming from inside the building.”

A nearby shriek caught everyone’s attention and even the Polymath took a moment’s pause from his writing.

“You stay here,” Cyrus said to Everett, “I’m going to see what’s going on.”

Cyrus walked down the hallway; sword drawn towards the source of the sound. A loud thumping, at regular intervals resounded through the maze of corridors. Rounding a corner, he was confronted by a man covered in blood, and dirt dressed in torn clothes, repeatedly hitting a large wooden door with his fists.

The man ceased his banging as Cyrus approached, slowly turning his head to reveal whitened eyeballs and a mouth covered in blood. He immediately rushed at Cyrus who reacted quickly enough to run him through with his sword. Cyrus kicked the zombie back, who fell to the ground but scrambled to rush forward again.

“How do you kill a zombie?” Cyrus murmured to himself. Stabbing didn’t work and the corridor was too narrow to swing in an arc. He swung his sword downward, cleaving the zombie’s head in two. The creature collapsed in a heap, “Mind blown,” he mumbled.

Running back to the lecture room where Everett stood guard, he cried, “Zombies! We’re being Z-rolled.”

Zombie Riots (or Z-rolls as they were often referred to) had become something of a running gag in cyberspace. These were seen as the ultimate prank by hackers to disrupt virtual environments. Riots had successfully breached two of the top three destinations, *New Eden*, a space colonizing game and even cybermon had been infiltrated by zombies on two occasions. These were seen as fairly harmless shenanigans as the denizens of both virtual spaces were very capable of doing away with them. The most infamous Z-roll happened in *Heartbreak High*, a popular teen dating environment. For twelve hours, the school grounds became a living schlock horror film until engineers were able to purge the system. Strangely enough, the shared experience of those trapped in the school led to some of the most successful and long-term romances to emerge from that space. Emotional bonds were created that far exceeded the usually superficial connections from cyberspace dating. So much so, that the producers of *Heartbreak High* soon launched a more specialised post-apocalyptic dating destination called *Love in the Time of Zombies*. It was successfully marketed as the place to find “undying love.”

“Zombies? Like undead ones?” said Everett in surprise.

“Well, they wouldn’t be zombies if they were alive, would they?” snapped Cyrus, “I found one in the college, I don’t know if there’s others. Stay here,” he yelled as he sprinted back down the hall.

Everett nodded and drew his sword. Looking out the window, he could now see a number of zombies roaming the streets, some trying to claw their way into buildings. The college was under siege by the undead.



## CHAPTER 22

### SHADOW ASSASSIN

**Sieges took many** forms in Brith. The longest siege recorded lasted three months at Miron Castle in the northern Duchy of Yaren. The Dwarven stronghold was set upon by an army of goblins from the northern reaches. The Red Guard, who were the peace keeping force in Yaren, were not inclined to come to the aid of non-humans, leaving the dwarves to fend for themselves. The industrious dwarves used that time to turn the keep itself into a steam powered war juggernaut. They renamed it the Miron Castle Hammer (or MC Hammer for short), after the juggernaut's twenty-ton steel hydraulic hammer. The giant automaton easily routed the invading forces and became known as one of the wonders of the realms. It was reported that the dwarves jeered as the goblin forces retreated, some stood at windows shouting, "Hammer time!" The MC Hammer remains active to this day in the northern reaches where it has gained a reputation as an impregnable mobile fortress, or in the words of the Dwarven architect behind it, "Sartos rath orodum kyth," which roughly translates to, "Untouchable."

Vanja had skilfully climbed atop one of the statue's arms, taking up her preferred long-range battle position. In preparation for the oncoming assault, Ava had blessed her arrows with holy fire and each glowing bolt exploded in a ball of white flame as they were launched into the seething mass of zombies below.

At the base of the statue, Wang, Alymere and Ava stood their ground, chopping away as the zombies writhed to mount the podium. There were now hundreds of undead making a mad dash, climbing over each other to reach them. Alymere's 'Protectorate's Shield' afforded them a temporary magical barrier whilst Wang hit them with 'Steel Flurry' in combination with Ava's swift moving 'Divine Blade'.

The zombies were unrelenting, attacking in a chaotic frenzy, for every one they cut down two more took its place. Wave upon wave of zombie bodies were hurled against Aymere's barrier until it was shattered.

"This would be an awfully disappointing way to die," declared Wang, "we can't beat this many. Anyone got any useful tricks?"

Ava stabbed her sword into the podium, exhausting much of her remaining magic in a 'Celestial Wave', which knocked back the hordes in a radiating circular force. The piles of bodies mounting alongside the podium were also dispersed, which afforded them a little respite.

"Where are your knights, Aymere?" shouted Wang who was starting to show some signs of frustration and weariness.

"Mostly dead. I had thirty knights in town, but the first assault surprised us. We couldn't rally into a formation." Aymere replied, using his shield to knock two zombies back into the enraged throng, "We were caught out in the open."

"I don't think we can hold them back for much longer," Ava added. Even she was starting to slow down from the prolonged battle.

"Where's that holy fire, Ava?" asked Wang, as he shoulder barged a zombie off the platform whilst slashing at two more.

Ava nodded. Backing away from the edge, she held out her sword with both hands in front of her, a cone of white flame extended from its tip engulfing zombies in its path. The fire spread as those caught in its wake flailed around. At least forty zombies were consumed by the flames, many crumbling to ash. The void in the mass, was soon filled as more undead surged forward. Ava collapsed exhausted from the final effort. Vanja deftly jumped down to her aid, sword drawn defending Ava, as more tried to clamber onto the podium.

The zombies pushed forward in an unstoppable effort to mount the stand. Each was cut down by skilful sword swings but as the battle wore on, the blade strokes came slower and the zombies came

faster. Dozens of bodies had piled up around the podium as the assault continued giving the undead easy access as they clambered over fallen corpses to mount the platform.

Even Wang was now visibly exhausted. It seemed an impossible victory. As the undead closed in, he started to quietly sing the Brith Song of the Dead, made popular by the Sleepless Choir.

*Beginnings and endings don't mean much to me, we all just live in our own heads.*

He continued slicing his way through zombie after zombie, finding a renewed vigour as he lifted his voice loudly. Alymere, recognising the words, joined in with a deep baritone.

*You say you're virtually living free, so what does it matter, who's living or dead?*

The song was interrupted as explosions suddenly lit the town square. Spinning projectiles landed amidst the horde, sending zombie pieces air borne. The undead ceased, motionless for a second, scanning the square for the new threat.

Atop the town hall roof appeared a female figure wearing black tight fitting leather armour and a mask, which hid all but her eyes. She somersaulted down from the rooftop landing in a spritely pose with one hand on the ground and another holding a sword on her back. The zombies turned their attention to her, and the town square was suddenly covered in a pitch-black darkness.

"I can't see anything," whispered Wang, "Can you?"

"This darkness is impenetrable," came Vanja's voice.

"It's shadow magic," Ava added.

More explosions filled the plaza. In the brief flashes of light, they could make out a dark figure, a blade in each hand, moving impossibly fast amidst the undead horde. Zombie bodies fell silently as she passed. Explosive blasts flashed all around them, lifting zombies into the air. The figure continued to cut a path through the



host at blinding speed creating a trail of still corpses as it went. After a minute or two, the explosions ceased, and the darkness was accompanied by a quiet calm. The unnatural shadows slowly lifted allowing them to survey the scene.

The throng of undead was now a mass of unmoving bodies. A lone zombie standing at the edge of the square let out a final moan. It dropped to its knees, its head rolling from its shoulders. Standing behind it was the black clad assailant.

She met their gaze with an intense stare of her own, then stepped back and melted into the darkness. The battle worn companions stood on the statue podium for long moments trying to catch their breath.

“Egad! What in the blazes was that?” asked Wang.

“Suzuka\_the\_Shadow\_Assassin,” said Alymere, “It can’t be coincidence that the number two Meta is in town,” he continued turning to the others, “The Tome of Leto is here, isn’t it?”



## CHAPTER 23

### ALEXA

**Cyrus had barred** the front entry to the college after removing two more zombies milling about the corridors. He was returning to the lecture room when a loud knock, accompanied by a female voice shouting “Let me in!” sent him scuttling back to the door. Hurriedly, he scrambled to remove the metal bar and locks, “Ava?” he said, flinging the door open. With a yelp, Cyrus slammed it shut again. He leant back against the door, his face white, sweat dripping down his cheek. A searing pain immediately ran up his right side, the sort that penetrated the Virtech® dampeners whenever he got truly distressed.

“I saw you, Cyrus. Open the door this instant!” came a voice grating against every fibre in his body. Cyrus took a moment to compose himself, then made a half-hearted attempt to neaten his hair before opening the door. Standing on the steps was a beautiful girl with blue hair and eyes, wearing leather armour. It was Alexa.

She shoved her way past him as he quickly locked and barred the door again. Once inside she rounded on him.

“Do you know what it’s like out there? There are hundreds of zombies running around. Both my friends were killed.”

“How’d you survive the tea party?” said Cyrus with his back against the door, his voice breaking.

“What!?”

“I saw you at the endless tea party when the Dark Crusaders attacked. How’d you get away?”

Alexa gave him a contemptuous stare, a hand on her hip.

“That’d be just like you, wouldn’t it? You probably scurried away the moment you saw me, didn’t you?”

Cyrus could only gape at her.

“Well, I got away, no thanks to you. You’re such a deadbeat... is that loser friend of yours here too? You two were always joined at the hip.”

Cyrus managed a nod and asked, “What are you doing in Tolwich?”

“What do you think I’ve been doing in Tolwich? I’ve been studying here. It’s a college town. Use your brain... or was it eaten by zombies?”

Cyrus remained still, saying nothing for long moments as Alexa looked at him. She suddenly smiled and broke into a laugh.

“God, you’re such a jerk, I can’t believe we dated.”

Seeing Cyrus’ frightened face turn to confusion, only added to her mirth. After a moment, Cyrus joined in with a nervous laugh of his own.

“Come here, give me a hug,” she said in a much more affable tone. Cyrus obliged, gingerly and quickly stepped back.

“You’re so useless... but I miss you... sometimes.” she said, “And why are you here in Tolwich?”

“Um... well we... Everett... and I... that is... We’re here to see the Polymath.”

“OK, well let’s go see him,” she said walking down the corridor.

“NO! No, it’s a private matter. Confidential... and all,” said Cyrus, the pain was returning, this time along his other side.

Alexa nodded, “Well I need to see him anyway,” she said flippantly and continued walking.

“Wait. Stop. I’ll get him for you,” interrupted Cyrus, “It’s a bit of a tricky matter, there are other parties involved, rather powerful parties

capable of doing horrific things if we broke our agreement with them. You stay here, and I'll fetch him."

Cyrus ran down the corridor oblivious to the fact that Alexa was following him. He turned left into the lecture room.

"You wouldn't believe who's here?" he said to Everett.

Everett looked beyond Cyrus to the hallway behind, "Alexa?" he asked warily.

"Yes... how did you..." Cyrus turned, almost tripping over his feet.

"Oh, hi!" he said with a nervous grin as Alexa entered crossing her arms.

"Good evening, Alexa," said the Polymath without looking up from his writing, "I trust your studies are going well, what can I do for you?"

"I need an extension on my Elven language assignment. It's hard to write when there's a zombie apocalypse going on," she said.

"That's the most original excuse I've heard for not completing work, but a reasonable request," said the Polymath dipping his quill in ink, "Tomorrow, I'll address all classes to discuss the impact of the plague on current workloads. Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all," Alexa said with a glance at both Everett and Cyrus.

"Hi Everett, how's everything at the barber shop?" she said snidely.

"Great, just wonderful," he said, suddenly interested in the floor.

"And why are you and Cyrus here, exactly?"

"We're getting something translated, with the college master, it's just a book," began Everett keeping his gaze down.

"You should take language lessons, then you could translate it yourself." Alexa turned to Cyrus, "And where are these 'powerful parties' you spoke of? Surely you're not talking about Everett here?"

“Alexa,” interrupted the Polymath, pausing his flowing pen strokes, “Whatever your relationship with these men, they are still paying customers who have engaged the college’s professional services. The academy not only offers those services, but discretion as well. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave the room.”

Alexa shared a private death stare with both Everett and Cyrus before traipsing down the hallway in a huff.

“What’s she doing here?” whispered Everett.

“Studying apparently, it’s a college town,” replied Cyrus with a shrug.

“She hasn’t changed,” said Everett, “It’s always eggshells around her. I don’t know what you ever saw in her.”

‘I’m going to wait by the front door and let the others in when they’re back.”

“*If* they come back,” mumbled Everett as Cyrus left the room. Once he was alone, he turned to the academy master, “So, Mr. Polymath, I don’t suppose we could arrange something special with the translation?”



## CHAPTER 24

### THE VISITOR

**Cybervation was particularly** painful for Cyrus that evening. His dysesthesia had hit a peak. The appearance of Wang, Vanja, Alymere, and especially Alexa had been a shock. It seemed he had the kind of bad luck that would make almost anyone look for an escape. Fortunately, Cyrus had one. He forced some food down, freshened up, and managed a quick shower before plugging into his virtual home to relax.

One of the most calming things, Cyrus found, was long walks within the manor grounds. He'd programmed a comfortable warm summer breeze at sunset and walked amongst the immaculate gardens. The experience was every bit as good as the real thing, from the feel of the wind to the seasonal birds who flew between the trees. Even wild deer were scattered about the estate, and a few made shy appearances as he casually strolled by. The pains subsided and he found himself in a far more relaxed state.

It was getting dark when Cyrus spotted a figure walking towards the entrance to his home in the distance, "Mum," he thought. It made sense she'd be visiting again; she always got a bit lonely around his dad's birthday and came calling like a seasonal flu, which hung around just a bit longer than needed. But it was understandable, and Cyrus often felt guilty he didn't spend more time with her. He walked in via a side entrance through the grand halls of the manor. She was ringing the doorbell incessantly.

"Coming," he yelled approaching the front door. Cyrus frowned; she was anxious to see him. When he opened the entrance, a tall gentleman wearing a grey tweed trench coat gave a friendly, "Hullo." He was wholly unremarkable in appearance, in his thirties with



receding short cropped dark hair and blue eyes, which seemed oddly familiar.

"Cyrus Paxton?" he asked in a voice, which Cyrus was certain he knew but couldn't place.

"Yes," Cyrus responded in confusion.

"I'm Private Detective Booth, may I come in for a chat?"

"S...Sure," Cyrus stuttered. The calm instantly vanished as a burning sensation shot down the right side of his shoulder. They found seats in a sitting room, near the main entrance.

"Nice place you have here... reminds me of Downton Abbey," observed Booth.

"It was based on it... the original estate, that is," Cyrus said shutting his eyes to manage through the haze of pain, "How can I help you? And how did you find my place?"

"Finding people is what I do, and I have some questions for you," Booth returned smoothly, removing a notepad and pen from his coat pocket, "There are some unusual happenings in Brith that you've been witness to, but let me get direct to the point... how well do you know, James Everett?"

"Well, I've known him online for a couple of years. I'd say I know him fairly well, as well as you can a cyberfriend."

"You know he was made redundant from Arctik Studios?"

"Yes, he told me he was a building designer there. Has he done something?" This wasn't quite the line of questioning Cyrus was expecting and he was curious where it was leading.

"You're aware that both Edmund Blessed and Scotty Garret died under strange circumstances, the last people they had contact with were yourself and James Everett."

"Yes, I know. But it was just coincidence we were there, we... we had nothing to do with it!" The pain along his back moved from right to

left and down his spine, it was always exacerbated by anxiety and the conversation was providing plenty of it, "Am I a suspect?" he managed through a pained haze.

"It looks pretty bad for you, wouldn't you say?" Booth leaned forward to look directly into Cyrus' eyes, "But... if I'm honest, I think you've been caught up in this by accident. Although, it's still no coincidence you're involved."

"What do you mean?" asked Cyrus nervously.

"You see, there was a third similar death before the other two. I've reviewed data around that incident. You weren't near where it occurred, but James Everett was."

"I don't think Everett would murder anyone. He's not especially threatening... and kind of puny," Cyrus said, remembering what Vanja had said, "Anyway, it's all just circumstantial," Cyrus frowned.

"Yes, I thought that too. Not enough to build a case. All data around the events has been corrupted and can't be reintegrated. However, there's one piece of data that did survive."

"What's that?"

"The karmic flag. The bad karma from killing those individuals has been attributed to Everett in the system."

The news floored Cyrus, "But I was with him, he never had any opportunity, he was as surprised as I was. He has no reason to."

"He lost his job. Perhaps he had a bone to pick with a few people at Arctik?" the detective asked with questioning eyebrows. Cyrus did recollect a few ramblings about unpleasant corporate politics now that he thought about it.

"I don't know," said Cyrus, running his hands through his hair, "It's just, I find it hard to believe he's murdering people. It's completely out of character, he's just not that sort of person. And how?"

"That's what I want you to find out for me. How he's doing it. I know about the crystals. It appears to be some sort of automated program

doing the dirty work. It's untraceable. He's using some sort of system back door that only an industry expert would know. You need to start protecting yourself or you could be indicted too. When the police get involved, they're not going to be as forgiving as I am."

The Detective leaned in closer, "You know you don't have any access to cyberspace in prison, don't you? I've read your file; how do you think that's going to work with your Dysesthesia? Even if they just decide to remand you whilst awaiting trial?"

Cyrus was silent for long moments as he tried to make sense of everything being said. The pain was distracting him, but Booth was right about one thing, incarceration would be worse than a death sentence.

"But what if I can't find anything?" said Cyrus, clenching his teeth against the pain shooting through his nerves, "What if he's not involved?"

"Oh, he's connected somehow. You're a resourceful lad, I'm sure you'll think of something. Let's keep this between us for now, if it gets out, then the authorities will be brought in. They don't care if they get the right person so long as it looks like they're doing their job. I'm giving you a chance to help me build a case. One, which indicts the right people."

Booth stood to leave, "I'll be here same time tomorrow. That's two days of game time. Let's hope you've got something I can work with by then."

"He's innocent, I'm sure of it," said Cyrus running both hands through his hair.

"Then you'd better come up with something that proves that," the detective said rising to leave, "I'd love to be wrong, but the evidence suggests otherwise."

"I... I'll do my best," Cyrus stuttered with eyes on the floor.

"Good lad. Ask yourself again," said Booth pointedly, "How well do you really know, James Everett?"

Detective Booth left feeling pleased with the conversation. Cyrus was even easier to manipulate than he expected, and now he had a man on the inside.

After Booth's departure, Cyrus sat for long minutes staring at a vase on the table. He half expected it to leap up and clobber him just to put an exclamation point on the evening, but surprisingly, it just sat there like an inanimate object. As the evening progressed, resolve set in. Cyrus started looking through Everett's social profiles and researching cyberspace murder, surely there was a clue somewhere. As Everett had alluded to, murder seemed impossible, but somehow these deaths were occurring. Nothing made sense. It was in the wee hours that the lack of sleep eventually caught up to Cyrus who nodded off while reading, only to be awakened four hours later by his Brith alarm.



## CHAPTER 25

### THE TOME OF LETO

**The grand hall** at Lyrax college was immense, and one of the finest examples of gothic style interiors in Brith. The high ceilings were ribbed with wooden arch supports that ran down the walls. Stained windows depicting famous scenes from Brith history, were spaced at even intervals between them.

Assembled at the front of the hall was a small group who listened as the Polymath ran through a summary of his findings from the Tome of Leto.

“This thing is coming for all of us? And we have no idea what it is, exactly?” asked Aymere.

“Its power is all encompassing and stems from the land itself. But it is neither good nor evil, it may not be the world breaker described in the histories,” the Polymath responded.

“Then what is it, exactly?” asked Wang.

“It’s whatever it’s moulded to be based on life experience, like all of us,” said the Polymath, “The key message in the Tome is that it needs to be guided, nurtured, whether its Brith’s champion or its undoing depends on Brith itself. I’d say it’s a rather clever piece of game design with multiple possible outcomes.”

“So, what are we supposed to do, find it and be nice to it?” Wang asked.

“You could do worse, but finding it is the challenge... it will appear human, initially,” continued the Polymath, “Leto has listed artifacts, personal items that once belonged to the *Neverborn*’s last incarnation. It will be drawn to them, finding those is your priority. There are details around where they were kept three thousand years

ago. The histories say the *Neverborn's* soul was compromised, which led to catastrophic consequences. You must find these items before those who would seek to corrupt it."

"And they'd still be there? That seems unlikely," interjected Wang.

"This is a game," began the Polymath, "Information being distributed in Brith doesn't happen accidentally. The information provided here will lead to something, maybe not directly, but eventually, of that you can be certain. Nothing happens by chance here."

"We're here by chance," said Everett looking at Cyrus, "We don't fit the Meta profile. No one could have predicted our involvement."

"Appearances can be deceiving," said Ava unexpectedly, "There's a reason you're here too. Someone out there wants you here. Lord\_Scottish said we were all muppets in this place."

"I think you mean puppets," said Everett.

"But we could well be muppets too, the two aren't mutually exclusive," added Cyrus.

"I object to being called a muppet. No one has had their hand up my backside for several months at least!" declared Wang mock indignantly.

Lord\_Scottish had in fact referred to Brith as The Muppet Show on several occasions. Not just for the behaviour of some of its more gormless inhabitants, but also for the way the game engine manipulated player movement. It gave the illusion of choice, but movement (at the Meta level at least) was very guided by the game engine, and the whims of the game narrative. Lord\_Scottish had criticised the lack of agency in Brith on several occasions saying, "This isn't a game, it's a carefully choreographed dance. You can't have so many interdependent plot streams... if someone misses a step the whole narrative collapses." The Hive director, Bartholomew Green at Arctik responded, "Scotty is a pioneer, but very old school in his thinking. All our players have as much freedom as they do in

life, if that appears to be none, then that's more a comment on the nature of reality than our game."

Ava giggled, embarrassed by her slip up, "Well, maybe the game engine didn't intend you to be here, at this time..." she paused, "...but someone wants you here. There are algorithms and tools in place that will place people at a certain place and time. Players are easily herded in Brith. The game needs them to move things forward. Lord\_Scottish had seen the Hive mechanics first hand." She turned to Everett, "You and Cyrus are here for a reason too. There are visible trajectories in Brith."

"Are you saying you can see them? Are you a COG?" asked Wang, "I thought you were Meta."

Ava laughed, "Glad to have passed the Turing Test."

"So, what do we do now?" asked Aymere, "This is months if not years of work. Are you happy for the Seraphim to get involved?"

"Let's keep it 'need-to-know' only," said Vanja in her usual cool tones, "Seraphim under your command are fine, but they don't need to know the details."

"I have had my scribes make two additional copies of my translation as instructed. One will be left with Vanja and Wang, one with you, Aymere, and Everett and Cyrus, you will receive my initial translation. The original Aergothian text will be safeguarded by the college as per your request."

"Now if you'll excuse me, I need to prepare for a meeting." The Polymath made a swift exit leaving the others to confer.

Cyrus barely paid attention to the ongoing discussion and it seemed Everett was equally distracted. It was a massive undertaking, which would play out far above their pay grade, and they only half listened as the others coordinated amongst themselves. After the meeting Everett pulled Cyrus aside.

"Cyrus, there's something I need to talk to you about," whispered Everett walking to a quiet corner.



"I need to talk to you too..." said Cyrus a little anxiously, "...about the deaths."

"What deaths?" said Everett a little confused, "Oh, you mean Lord\_Scottish and Edmund Blessed?"

"Yes, and apparently someone named Iorwerth Prosser died too. Do you know him?"

"Iorwerth? That skanky deviant? He was a regular at the Wolf's Head. He owned brothels and always had three or four pleasure COGs hanging off him. He was a real player, and I'm not talking the gaming sort. When did he die?"

"A few weeks back."

"That would be around when I last saw him, I guess. He was a piece of work." said Everett, "I'm not surprised he was targeted, though. He wasn't exactly a likeable sort."

"Everett, I'm sorry, but I'm just going to have to ask. You've been near all three victims. Did you have anything to do with their deaths?"

"You're yanking my chain, right?" Everett laughed and looked at Cyrus. But there was no hidden jest, only a mix of fatigue and misery on his friend's face, "What? You're serious? No! God, no. Where would you get that idea from? That's total bunk," Everett looked genuinely hurt, "I guess it does look suspicious, though. But no, I swear... wait, a sec," he said suddenly realising there was more going on here, "How did you hear about Iorwerth? I didn't even know about that. What's going on Cyrus?"

Cyrus fell silent, carefully weighing his options. He was caught between what he instinctively felt was right and potential incarceration. Even a day without cyber access could be enough to drive him over the edge... he carefully sought a middle ground.

"I think there's an investigation going on..." Cyrus finally said, "...and both you and I are suspects."

“Suspected of what?” said Alexa as she casually approached them from down the corridor.

“Hi Alexa,” managed Cyrus. She always had a way of turning up at exactly the wrong moment.

“Suspected of what? Being idiots? Yes, I can see you’re both likely suspects for that.”

“It’s nothing. Just, you know... a quest,” said Everett, turning away to avoid any further conversation.

“Well, I suspect that you’re both guilty of something. Probably something thoroughly uninteresting though.”

“Probably,” said Cyrus, “You know us, no one would accuse us of being interesting,” Cyrus trailed off with a nervous laugh.

“Who are your friends?” Alexa abruptly asked with her eyes on Ava and Vanja, “They look Meta, do you think you have what it takes to play in the big leagues now?”

“Alexa, don’t you have anything better to do?” asked Everett finally losing patience with the constant jibes.

“Right now, I don’t. Besides, it’s always fun sniping at you two. You make it so easy,” she said with a smile, “Come on, loosen up a bit. I’m a bitch but not that much of a bitch. Stop taking yourselves so seriously.”

“Fine,” sighed Everett, “but we have a lot of preparation to do before we leave.” He walked over to join Ava who was chatting to Wang and Vanja.

“You’ve been busy. Playing the Meta game? I always thought you two were poster boys for Cyber Darwinism.”

This was not a compliment. Cyber Darwinism was a term coined in 2051 by data scientists from the Borland Virtual Institute seeking to identify key attributes that led to survival in massive multiplayer environments. Interestingly enough, it was not the accumulation of power or wealth that contributed to character longevity, this in fact

made individuals more of a target. The Brith Global 200, after all, went through rapid change on a near daily basis.

The most important factors for survival were in fact blandness and mediocrity. The less remarkable you were, the longer you were likely to survive. The longest-lived player in Brith was Michael Clements (known in game by the handle Mike\_Clements) who had been playing *Neverborn* since launch. Michael spent most of his time farming and selling cyber produce at the Roh markets. Even his conversations were so shallow that he was often mistaken for a low-level COG by other players. He flew so far under the radar that most people could neither recall having met him or even his presence at social events. Speaking of their findings, a Borland spokesman would say, "Longevity in environments like Brith is quite at odds with reality. The longest-lived characters are generally the most uninteresting and undistinguished. To put our findings into a single phrase, longevity in cyberspace is essentially, *"Survival of the shittest."*

"And how are you coping with the Meta game?" asked Alexa.

"Not great so far. It involves a bit of grovelling and a lot of running away," Cyrus replied with a wry smile.

"I was hoping we'd get some time alone to talk," said Alexa looking intently at Cyrus.

"Why's that?" asked Cyrus, a little alarmed by her sudden change in tone and manner.

"Come with me, there's something I want to show you," she said, taking Cyrus by the hand. She led him down a maze of corridors to a large wooden door. They entered her college quarters and she shut the door behind them.

"Uh, what are we doing here?" asked Cyrus.

"What do you think we're doing here?" she said, putting his hand on her back.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” mumbled Cyrus as she pressed up close against him and started planting small kisses on his neck.

“I think you should just stop thinking for a second, and go with the moment,” Alexa replied.

Despite his cocktail of emotions, Alexa was difficult to resist on a physical level. The two were extremely sexually compatible, it had been much of the basis of their relationship.

Sex in Brith was relatively tame compared to certain specialised destinations, but there was still a lot more debauchery going on behind closed doors here than in the real world. After all, avatars were almost always someone's idea of physical perfection. Remove all the unpleasantness and risk factors of casual encounters in the real world, and there was simply no reason not to find pleasure in VR. Furthermore, sensitivity was often dialled up making many experiences far more intense than the equivalent in reality. Real sex had become simply pedestrian in comparison and many of the cybergeneration avoided it altogether.

The only downside to cybersex was that after a long session of unbridled passion, the real-life clean-up was sometimes rather messy. One of the big surprise successes of the cyberage was the market for adult nappies, which had seen a ten thousand percent increase in sales over the period of a few short years. Adult nappies had gone from embarrassing to having a kinky sexy edge to them. Cyrus was suddenly wishing he had put one on.

An hour later, Alexa was lying in bed with Cyrus’ arms around her, “Now that’s the send-off you should have given me,” said Alexa, “I would have appreciated that a lot more.”

“I could never understand what was going on below the surface with you,” said Cyrus, “I know how you work on the outside, though,” he said giving her a little squeeze and kissing her on the forehead, “What have you been doing the last few months, anyway?”

“I’ve been here mostly,” she said stroking his hair, “Three months on and off at the academy. Learning Elvish, leather working, and herb lore. Going to a few festivals and events. You know, the usual.”

“The Polymath seems very knowledgeable; he seems to have a lot of integrity.”

“Ha! Where’d you get that idea?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t let him fool you,” began Alexa, “He has that charming professional exterior, but there’s a lot more going on there. There’s a lot of underhanded deals made in this place, it’s a political minefield filled with intrigue. His office is through that wall and I can hear some of the conversations. He gets regular visits from this guy who only comes late at night, I overheard them talking just a few days ago. Something about Edmund Blessed...”

“What did they say?” said Cyrus, suddenly sitting up.

“Well, I didn’t catch all of it, but they were talking about ‘getting Edmund out of the way’ and someone called ‘Kyra’. Then there was some discussion about a cyberwedding or union or some such.”

Cyrus sat, trying to process this new information, “Was this before Blessed died?” he asked.

“I think so,” said Alexa sitting up and massaging his shoulder, “Why does it matter?”

“I’m not sure yet...” said Cyrus, “...but I think it could help me out of a pickle.”

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *The Tome of Leto and its contents is now safely in the hands of top tier Meta. We can only put its temporary disappearance down to a blip in our Hive systems. We currently have two of our top engineers running the code through its paces, optimising and debugging.*

*On another note, the grand festival in Lordshelm opens today. Visit the east coast to catch the excitement, we'll be launching our newest sponsor there, Pampers Adult Fit. As they say, 'Happiness is a full nappy'.*

*Live to play!*



## CHAPTER 26

### KYRA

**It had been** a long journey for Kyra. The sort of meandering trip from town to town that one took whilst holidaying in foreign lands. Not that anyone took those sorts of holidays anymore.

Kyra had been isolated for as long as she could remember, a slave to her lord's bidding. The concepts of freedom and exploration were entirely new. Brith was fascinating and Kyra enjoyed indulging in its delights. There was so much to do and discover that she never knew existed. Her latest discovery was almond croissants. It was a world changer... how could something so delicious have been kept secret for so long?

Gold pieces, Kyra discovered, could be traded for these pastries and anything else she required. She'd left home with quite a number of these coins and her supply could be easily replenished. People were always willing to help, and with time, she found new ways to get by. It turned out, if she just used the right turn of phrase or smiled in the right way, many would do her bidding. The inhabitants of this world were getting easier to understand, it all came through trial and error. Everything had a measurable cause and effect, and she could see the patterns at work.

It wasn't long before Kyra started to realise her own value. Perhaps more value than most. Now that she had been exposed to a large sample of faces, she could appreciate there was a lot of remarkable beauty in Brith. But her beauty was exquisite, simply a cut above anything she encountered. Her bone structure was worthy of a master sculptor's magnum opus, and she was learning to make the most of it.



Kyra was also a quick study. With just a day's training under the tutelage of sword master, Nimrod\_Bershad, she was able to best his top student. This too had proven useful, especially travelling between towns where she encountered beings she couldn't easily influence through other means. It was simply another system that required mastery.

Kyra had just entered the town of Marrick. In three weeks, she had gained a certain degree of control over her surroundings. This world had rules, everything made sense and had a logic behind it. Everything, that is except one.

It was an inexplicable feeling embedded deep within her. She didn't always pay heed to it, but it was there. A desire to travel east. Kyra had ignored it for weeks, but it persisted. A nagging feeling that she was overlooking some sort of predetermined destiny every time she diverted course. She'd made a decision now to follow her instincts, to listen to what the inner voice had to say. Kyra would travel east and embrace whatever fate awaited her. It was a major undertaking, but she was now committed. And there was always opportunity for a little more discovery along the way.



## CHAPTER 27

### FILM STARS

**“I think the** Polymath is somehow involved. Well, at least in Edmund Blessed’s death,” said Cyrus quietly to Everett. They’d left the academy grounds to discuss matters in private and were seated in a quiet corner of the central plaza. The bodies infected by the Moaning Death, had burnt away with the first rays of the sun leaving the town square clear apart from ash blowing in the breeze.

“And how do you know this?” queried Everett.

“Alexa told me she overheard the Polymath talking to someone... they discussed getting Blessed ‘out of the way’, and a few other matters,” said Cyrus maintaining a calm exterior that belied the turmoil below the surface.

“That’s hardly a murder confession,” said Everett with a frown.

“Apparently the Polymath is a lot more duplicitous than he looks,” continued Cyrus, “He’s not the respectable academic he appears to be.”

“Um yeah, about that. I meant to talk to you. I kinda worked that out. I cut a deal with him, under the table, so to speak,” said Everett a little guiltily.

“You did what? When?” said Cyrus.

“It was when you were on zombie patrol, I used my half of the money to convince him to neglect to translate a page... he translated it separately on parchment for me,” said Everett.

“He agreed to that?” said Cyrus in disbelief.

“It’s his job is to make as much money for the college as he can, of course he agreed to it. He seems to have fairly flexible morals,”

replied Everett, “And besides, there’s no way we can find those artifacts. They’re all going to have Meta guardians. This is the only shot we have at staying in the game. We don’t mess around with Meta-quests, we simply find the *Neverborn* on our own.”

Cyrus sat in silence. It seemed Everett was a bit loose with his ethics too. It wasn’t very reassuring given recent events, but it was a far cry from murder.

“Besides, what you’re saying doesn’t make sense. The Polymath couldn’t kill anyone, it’s completely contrary to the base Brith matrix. Their AIs can’t harm anyone. Well, they kill people’s avatars all the time, but they couldn’t cause real harm. There are safeguards at the very core of every COG’s matrix, not to mention game safety guards, and hardware guards. The idea of murder in cyberspace is ridiculous.”

“But didn’t he say he was a custom build? A similar matrix to Ava? We don’t know where they came from. They could easily have flown under the radar of any regulatory practices.”

“I guess,” said Everett distractedly.

COGs in Brith generally relied on the four Fs of evolution as their primary drivers; *Fighting, Fleeing, Feeding* and *Fornicating*. Custom COGs broke the mould, and the Polymath, for example, had four Ps, which underpinned many of his actions. *Profit, Profile, Process* and *Preservation*. These principles were originally established amongst AIs used to manage operations within business and government environments. They were carefully constructed to maximise efficiency, revenue and build the reputation of establishments, whilst masking any unsavoury practices used along the way that might cause damage to the company standing. Nothing much had changed in the way businesses were run. They still took shortcuts where they could, and ignored the human equation for profit. AI’s just did it smarter, objectively and more proficiently. Nine in ten of all large companies were now run by AI’s and even those that persisted with a human CEO used them more as a celebrity figurehead for public

relations. Arctik itself was one of the few outliers, where their CEO played an active role.

“Well assuming this is true, and not some goose chase of Alexa’s, how can we find out more?” asked Everett.

“I don’t know... we could talk to the Polymath?” replied Cyrus nervously.

“We can’t talk to him if he’s involved,” said Everett, “He’ll just deny it. Or worse. You’ve never worked in corporate before, have you? You have to tread carefully, finding the truth is a minefield. And besides, we have a Meta quest to pursue.”

“Look... forget the Meta quest. It’s not important!” Cyrus lost his temper.

“Not important? It’s the single most important thing right now.”

Cyrus let out a heavy sigh, “There’s more I need to tell you...” he began, meeting Everett’s gaze firmly, “I was visited by a detective. They think Blessed and the others were murdered... somehow. Right now, you’re the main suspect.”

“What?” asked Everett sitting up, his eyes dilating sharply, “That’s preposterous!”

“The in-game death of all three has been written against your karmic flag. That’s got to be why that skin creeper came after us.”

“WHAT?”

“Look, I was with you, I know you didn’t do it. Something’s not right. But we need to find some sort of proof.”

“PROOF!?” exclaimed Everett, “What happened to innocent until proven guilty?”

“You’re not alone in this, I could be implicated too.”

“I’m innocent. I clearly didn’t do it. I wouldn’t even know how.” Everett examined the ground from left to right as if expecting to find an

answer there, “This has got to be some sort of system glitch,” he muttered.

The two sat quietly as Everett attempted to make sense of things. Finally, he broke the silence as a sudden realisation struck him, “This is Arctik,” he murmured, “this is because I was using insider knowledge, we went after the Tome of Leto.”

Cyrus’ eyebrows made an attempt to jump off the top of his forehead, “That’d be an overreaction. Are they really that ruthless?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t know. They were ruthless enough about firing me. Have you got a better explanation? They have an economy worth trillions to protect.”

Cyrus sunk his head into his hands, overwhelmed by events and a burning ache that ran down his right shoulder, “We can’t fight a corporation. How’d we end up in this mess? It’s just a game. We’re supposed to be having fun.” Cyrus wished for a return to his monotonous routine.

Everett seemed to zone out as he processed everything, “It’s like we’re in a movie,” he murmured, “Like we’re at the centre of some massive conspiracy and if we could get to the heart of it, we can defeat the bad guys and win the girl,”

“No one buys those plotlines anymore,” replied Cyrus, “That’s why no one watches film anymore.”

Cinema had become fairly niche entertainment, but enough of a market still existed to sustain a small industry. Of course, film making techniques had undergone a revolution in the last few decades. Most were shot entirely in cyberspace, which made anything possible. It was simple to create new stories using your favourite actors and franchises of long ago.

It was an efficient process, almost everything could be achieved in post-production and AIs were capable enough to mimic the visual style and storytelling of many big-name directors of the past such as

Kubrick, Spielberg and Scorsese. Essentially anyone could make a film with so much knowledge of the craft becoming fully automated. A feature film could be produced in the space of days. The only areas many AIs still struggled with, was plot, storytelling and script development, which is where human input was still required.

The sort of brilliant minds who were once dedicated to bringing ideas to the big screen had fled the industry when the glamour, power and money went. There were more progressive storytelling formats in VR, which attracted the top talent. Actors were the biggest industry casualty when COGs easily mastered their craft. As a specialist AI engineer put it, "There is surprisingly not a great deal to acting. All naturalistic human behaviours are already built into our COG's core matrix. Mastering the craft doesn't require much effort. It consumes more memory for a COG to master pizza making than acting." These comments, published in several high-profile film industry journals, led to the actor's strike of 2043. The studios, however, who were never fond of actor fees and egos, were quick to side with the engineers. Many big-name actors have been acting outraged ever since.

"You know," said Cyrus, "It's funny, I've never had the spotlight on me... up until now. My whole life I've felt that I'm just an extra in someone else's film. Do you ever get that feeling?"

"No, I've always been the star of my own little drama. Everything happens to test me... to see if I can handle what's thrown my way. We can handle this, Cyrus, we can get through this," Everett replied with a strange mix of determination and vagueness.

"Well... what now, James Dean? How do we not crash and burn?" asked Cyrus.

Everett sighed, considering their options, "We have three leads. The Polymath... that's tenuous at best, and Arctik is impenetrable. They're both dead ends."

"We follow Ava," he decided, "If she thinks she can explain Scotty Garrett's death, it would clear us. An AI of her capability is precisely the sort of ally we need right now."

The haunted look suddenly returned to his eyes, "Are you sure they think it's me?"

"Positive."

"I'm going to head back to the academy and talk to her," replied Everett as he prepared to leave, "Maybe I'll see you milling about in the background somewhere."

Cyrus took the opportunity to sit in the morning sun, absorbing the heat. He hadn't felt the real sun on his skin in years and that wasn't just because he lived in London, it was a common side effect of the cyberlifestyle. Even simulated sun had an uplifting effect on one's mood and today he had need to feel good. After several long moments, he audibly groaned as he lifted himself up. Looking about the plaza, Cyrus suddenly noticed a familiar shadowy figure with a pipe and broad brimmed hat observing him on the far side of the square. They met eyes for a moment. Without drawing undue attention to himself, Cyrus made his way to the academy as fast as he could.





## CHAPTER 28

### CHESS

**Wang was contemplating** his next move. He was in trouble. An early advantage had been lost as his opponent effortlessly turned the tables on him. She was the strongest foe he'd ever faced. What made the possibility of defeat even more humiliating was his adversary had just learned how to play the game an hour ago.

"Knight to G5," he finally called as he moved the wooden pieces on the board. Wang, or Penfold Waenge as he was known outside of Brith, had all the makings of a Meta. He had achieved a master rating at chess in his teens, and now spent his time in pursuit of more challenging games such as *Neverborn*. The mix of logic and spatial ability required to play games like *chess* and go were the best indicator of one's aptitude for performance in cyberspace.

Ava played rook to G8, "I think you lose your queen in four moves. It's an unavoidable trap," she said with a smile.

"Blast it," said Wang toppling his king in resignation, "That's three games in a row. I can't beat her," he said looking to Vanja, "She's too damn strong."

"I can play you left-handed if it helps," said Ava with a mischievous smile.

It had been several years since chess had been played competitively by anyone. The game had become more of a curiosity since the QUISC had discovered a perfect solution for the game. If white played pawn to D4, black had to play a flawless game just to draw. A single deviation from the identified game play paths would result in a loss. The revelation sent the chess world into disarray. The most commonly played avenues were memorised by the elite players, and almost every tournament and match ended in a draw. The various

chess organisations disbanded in 2057, when all the players at the world championship simply agreed to a draw before their games even commenced. Competitive chess had been relegated to history, although it had found some popularity as a casual pastime in virtual environments like Brith.

“It seems you’re being outplayed. But we shouldn’t be wasting time on games. Suzuka is still out there, and we can’t afford to be outplayed by her,” said Vanja.

“Well... this is all a game, in case you forgot,” said Wang with his arms wide.

“Alymere has already headed south,” began Vanja, ignoring Wang, “there’s an item to the east according to the tome. The *Neverborn* wielded two swords blessed with divine magic. *Brightflame* and *Coldburn*. We are searching for *Coldburn*. It’s located just a day’s journey east of here in the mountains. A place called Vetrahell.”

Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang listened intently. He generally let Vanja make these sorts of calls, but the conversation wasn’t really aimed at him. Vanja’s pitch was directed at Ava.

“You were travelling east, weren’t you?” asked Vanja her eyes fixed on Ava.

“Yes, I’m travelling that way. But I have my own reasons,” Ava replied.

“Good lady, perhaps we could arrive at some quid pro quo arrangement?” began Wang, “We could certainly use your help if you’re headed east. Have you heard the tale of the Knights of the Third Realm?”

Wang quickly launched into his story before Ava could react, “They were Meta players sworn to recover the Jewel of Arianoch upon pain of death, only they shirked their duty to get wasted at a pub along the way, you see, it was Wunjo\_the\_Wise’s birthday, and he thought it’d be a great idea for the whole group to get plastered at the Wolf’s Head tavern along the way. By the time they reached their

destination, Armando\_Short\_Fellow, had already recovered the Jewel, it made their life's work in Brith pointless."

Ava chuckled, which was maybe not the desired reaction, "So what happened to them?"

"I believe four of them took their own lives, started again with new characters. But Wunjo renamed himself as 'Wunjo\_the\_not\_so\_Wise'. He travels from pub to pub telling tales about how he almost made the top twenty, that's where all the Wunjo memes come from. He makes a pretty decent living from it, actually. But my point is that Meta quests tend to blow up in your face, if you don't address them quickly. It happens all the time," said Wang attempting to steer back towards relevance. His stories always had a clear connection in his mind, verbalising it sometimes proved challenging, "Someone always gets there before you do. You can't be complacent about it. Nothing else matters when you're playing the Meta game."

"I see," said Ava with a giggle.

"If you help us, we can help you, and we're both going in the same direction," Vanja interrupted before Wang could add more. His stories weren't always very helpful.

"I could probably help if it's on the way, but my mission is crucial too. My lord was killed. The answers lie to the east," said Ava as Everett joined them in the sitting room.

"What are we discussing?" asked Everett as he entered the room and took a seat.

"The murder of Lord\_Scottish," replied Ava.

"Murder? I heard something of that, but it's not especially surprising," said Wang, "People are murdered every day in Brith. I've murdered scores of people in my time! But they deserved it."

"I'm not talking about the cyberworld," said Ava quietly, "People are being murdered in real life. But it's happening through VR."

“What’s happened exactly?” asked Vanja.

Ava took a deep breath and carefully laid out the events leading up to the death of Lord\_Scottish, it couldn’t do any harm sharing with this small group. In fact, the more people who knew what was really going on, the better as far as she was concerned. Vanja absorbed every detail before giving a considered response.

“There is theoretically a way to bypass the Virtech® safeguards and kill someone in cyberspace,” she said, “the safeguards only track harmful inputs, it’s possible you could overload someone’s pleasure centres and induce a stroke or heart attack. Well... in theory.”

“Like some sort of orgasmic death!” exclaimed Wang.

“Well, that’s one way of putting it, yes. You could hit all the pleasure centres at once, not just sexual pleasure. Fulfilment, success, wholeness... the Virtech® can trigger these feelings,” said Vanja with a glance at Wang.

“You really know your onions, don’t you,” he replied.

“What do you mean?” asked Vanja, her perfectly smooth forehead wearing a sudden crinkle.

“It’s a saying...” began Wang but he trailed off without explaining himself.

“How do you know this?” asked Everett.

“Virtech® is the pride of Sweden and employs one in five Swedes... it’s so big it makes Ikea look like a corner store. My brother’s an engineer there. It’s a known flaw, but they won’t put any limits on pleasure inputs, it would be an unpopular move. There’s a lot of elderly people who die every day whilst engaged in, let’s say ‘pleasurable activities.’ It’s not something they like to publicise, and it always appears as a natural death.”

They were interrupted by the Polymath who popped in on his way elsewhere, “Do you have everything you require? Are you all leaving Lyrax today?”

“Yes,” said Vanja, “We are headed east. Your services have been very helpful.”

The Polymath nodded, “Then I wish you safe travels. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to my monthly report to the board.” The master pivoted and hurried back down the corridor.

The group readied their gear and prepared to leave.

“We’ll find answers to the east,” said Ava, “I just know it.”

Ava’s expression displayed a surety that seemed beyond questioning. There was something more at play here and Ava seemed to have a sense for it although none could say where it came from.

“And we’re coming with you,” stated Everett firmly, “If there’s a chance to solve this mystery it’s in our interests too.”

Cyrus joined them outside the academy. As they made their final preparations, none noticed the small floating crystal object that purposefully made its way through the labyrinth of corridors inside Lyrax. Alexa was the sole witness as it glided past her private quarters towards the academy board room.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** We have been receiving an increased number of requests for the creation of virtual children born of cyber characters in Brith. The algorithm used to create a hybrid growing child from the union of two character avatars is available to us but there are a number of issues that make our environment unique. As you're aware, having virtual children is already possible in some virtual lands but Brith poses a number of challenges, which make it problematic on a moral and legal level. We have rights to the most advanced algorithms on the market, which are capable of generating fully self-aware AIs based on simulated gene mixing. Our engineers are currently simplifying this to work with the avatar data we have available in Brith. The process may take several months but we will keep you up to date.

*Live to play!*





## CHAPTER 29

### THE PRINCE

**Marrick was to** the east. It wasn't a frequently used travel stop, but Tolwich was still closed as a consequence of the plague and supplies were needed. They'd spent much of the journey in silence. All except Wang, who chatted in a stream of consciousness.

"...and that's why the migration of swallows in Brith is unrealistic and needs to be addressed," he finished with a slightly smug tone. It was an astute observation but sadly went unacknowledged by the group. Instead, Everett thought to use the momentary pause in the monologue as an opportunity to change the subject.

"So, forgive my asking," said Everett in low tones to Wang, "But how long have you and Vanja been together? You act like an old married couple."

Vanja sniffed loudly behind them, "We are just business partners. Believe me, there is nothing more to it," she said before Wang could reply.

"Well, you've been very successful together," added Cyrus, "you do seem well suited. I assumed you were a couple too."

"Good sir, Vanja is perfection personified, but quite a challenging catch for anyone. You're very welcome to try win her affections, countless have tried and failed. Even Aymere seemed a bit keen when we first met. He didn't get anywhere of course," said Wang.

Ava laughed, "Aymere's more in love with himself, surely, "

"I like to choose my men, they don't choose me," said Vanja sharply, "But my friend is neglecting an important detail. I did make a pass at him when we met. I thought he'd be an interesting diversion... he refused me."

“Oh?” asked Everett with a surprised start. His gaze turning to Wang for confirmation.

“Ah yes, well that was a misunderstanding. Vanja is beautiful of course, but my preferences lie elsewhere.”

“Oh, I understand... I think,” said Everett.

“Mmm... well what you think may be a simple way of looking at it. But ‘yes.’ I do prefer the company of men for the most part,” said Wang, “Although there was this lovely barbarian lady once who rather tickled my fancy.”

Generally speaking, people were a little more flexible with their sexual preference in cyberspace. An anonymous survey conducted by Pampers, makers of the happy nappy, found that many more people had experimented in cyberspace with both same sex and group sex encounters, which they would never consider in reality. The deciding factors were the anonymity and the removal of the *ick factor*, which sometimes accompanied real-life liaisons. One respondent to the survey wrote, “*Sexual persuasion is of no consequence in cyberspace. Love is what matters. You never know who people really are in cyberspace. You just don’t know if your partner is really a man or a woman, what nationality, or even how old they are. There are simply no barriers or boundaries in cyberspace, not even between people and AI’s. When all else is make believe, love is real.*”

Ava laughed in such a human way that it made Everett stop to observe her, “Well now we know your type. I’ll be sure to let you know if any barbarians cross our path,” she giggled.

“Men, preferably. I think I just like the tanned muscular look,” added Wang, though was stopped short by the appearance of another group of travellers on the road.

“Greetings, travellers,” a tall regal spokesperson greeted them, “You are in the presence of Prince Donfallas of the Elven kingdom. Heir to the Aspen Throne of the wood elves.”

The prince was both tanned and muscular but had delicate elfin features that weren't quite rugged enough to attract Wang's attention.

He and his entourage travelled the west road out of Marrick. It had been a long but quiet journey. Elven Princes weren't always given the sort of respect you'd expect in human lands, but the Kingdom of Orsus was quite cosmopolitan and far more welcoming than the other three human territories.

The Elven Forest state of Quanara was a mystery to most of the non-elven populace of Brith. It was located right in the middle of the continent, but few ventured into its highly wooded areas. If you were the type of player who liked adventure, excitement, and battling the forces of evil, you'd generally choose to live in human lands. However, if you much preferred political intrigue, mystery, subtle manoeuvres and wilful backstabbing, then the Elven capital of Ankara was the place for you. This had given native elves something of a reputation.

The prince and his attendants had made the journey with a very specific purpose in mind, they had been travelling human lands for close to a year now.

"Well met, good Malantre," began Wang using the term to address an elven aristocrat, "Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, Knight of the Golden Order. This is Vanja, a Rider of Crad, Ava the Avatar of Skara Brae, Cyrus... um... a man of integrity, and Everett... who is... uh... also a man," Wang struggled to think of anything to add and left it there.

"We have travelled far, seeking assistance," the spokesman continued, "The crown has been taken by a pretender, the Prince's cousin. We seek the aid of capable and just warriors, to reclaim the throne. The Wood Elves' treasure room would be open to our benefactors," the elf paused to appraise the reaction of the group. Seeing only disinterest, he continued, "You are surely a group of formidable and accomplished warriors, are you not?"

“Good Malantre, we are otherwise engaged. Alas, we have a most pressing matter of our own to attend,” replied Wang with a bow of apology.

“Lands, titles and gold would be granted to you once the coffers are secured.”

“My apologies, good Malantre,” Wang turned to the prince, who was sitting upon a horse drawn throne, “Your Royal Highness. I hope only the best for you in your journeys,. We are on a quest already, which is crucial to all of Brith. We cannot detour from our course.”

The prince nodded in greeting, smiling a charming princely smile, “You have the bearing of the heroes of legend. I bid you well in your travels.”

The caravan moved past them, all except the prince’s spokesman who remained behind to speak.

“Thank you for hearing our plea. I am Aramos, Majordomo to the prince. I was hoping I may speak to you as there exists another avenue for the righteous to offer aid. The prince himself would never ask, but any contributions you could spare to build our forces, would be returned tenfold when we claim what is ours.”

The Donfallas Caravan had been operating successfully now for over a year. They were a ragtag band of elven rogues who took upon the idea of impersonating a Prince to gather funds. It was a bit of a joke to begin with, but it had proven so successful that they’d made a business of it. No one wanted to fight in a foreign prince’s war, but many were willing to gamble on a prince reclaiming their throne if they had spare coin.

They had begun their quest in the Duchy of Yaren and travelled down the east coast through Chessex and now into Orsus. Many assumed they were part of some official narrative thread and it had become a highly lucrative venture. They had raised over two million in gold, which they’d transferred to trust accounts with any extra spent on wine and other diversions along the way. The crew took

turns playing the prince, which came with its own benefits. Love was offered quite freely in Brith already and there were many who could not resist the experience of bedding Elven royalty. The five members of the group figured they had only another six months at most before their activities caught up to them. But for now, it was easy money and had been fairly trouble free.

“This is indeed, an appalling injustice that has befallen your Prince,” said Wang with a look towards Vanja for input, “Perhaps we have some funds to spare.”

Everett chuckled and whispered to Cyrus who immediately cleared his throat loudly, “Our mission is urgent, I’m afraid we don’t have much coin on us, we must be on our way.”

The elf approached him, putting on his best earnest face, “I understand my friend,” he said taking his hand in a firm grip and placing the other on his shoulder, “It has been tough times for everyone. Good luck in your quest.” The elf left hurriedly to re-join the caravan.

When he was out of earshot, Everett burst into laughter, “You didn’t believe that bunk, did you?” he said, looking at Wang whose smile was rapidly replaced by an expression of alarm, “Those bluster artists have been shovelling that bollocks all along the east coast for the last year. There were bets at Arctik on when they’d get caught.”

Wang made a small choking sound as both horror and outrage fought for dominance over his face, “Oh, I say,” he finally managed.

“The ‘foreign prince needing funds.’ It’s the oldest trick in the book,” Cyrus added, “It’s been around since my mum was a kid.” The amusement felt good and Cyrus forgot his troubles for just a moment, “You weren’t seriously going to give them anything, were you?”

Wang appeared completely dumbfounded, the expression was seldom seen, which was for the best. It wasn’t his most becoming look.

“Are you saying these people are thieves? That they remorselessly deceive people for personal gain?” asked Ava following the conversation with interest.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” said Everett confidently, “they must have stolen millions by now.”

Cyrus’ amusement soon vanished replaced by his familiar anxiety as the realization that something was amiss dawned on him. It seemed the laugh was on him, “That elf, he took my coin bag. He’s got all my funds...”

Ava turned her horse with a sigh, “I’ll get it back for you,” she said riding swiftly after the caravan.

“Is she going to need any help?” asked Wang.

“Probably not,” said Everett watching Ava ride into the distance, “It looks like she’s on a mission to break the Crown Jewels.”

Cyrus moaned, “I hope she gets it back! I’ve always wanted to see scammers get their comeuppance.”

“I’ve seen her in battle, she’s a scary woman,” said Wang, “You know, I once won a Meta duel with a finishing move to the Crown Jewels. It was against Azhur\_the\_Unblinking, a half-orc berserker. He should never have been in the Meta, left himself wide open and I hit him with a ‘Shield Comet Rush’. He was eight feet tall, which was the perfect height for a blow right to the diamonds,”

Everett winced, “Sounds painful.”

“I really think I broke them,” said Wang speculating, “or at least, he was never heard from again.”

Fifteen minutes later Ava returned, throwing a bag to Cyrus, “What happened?” asked Cyrus curiously.

“I got your bag of coins back,” said Ava with a smile.

“Did they put up a fight?” asked Wang.

“Not much of one, but they seemed certain they’d met me before, that I was in Marrick. It makes me wonder who exactly, they saw.”

“We were going to stop for supplies there anyway,” said Vanja, “we’ll be in Marrick before dusk.”





## CHAPTER 30

### MARRICK

**Marrick was a very** ordinary small town. Located a ways off the main road, it didn't attract much foot traffic and many didn't even use it as a travel stop due to its proximity to Tolwich. But today it had its share of unexpected visitors.

Kyra was very much taken with Marrick.

A small bakery called 'Divine Delicacies' was her latest discovery. It purportedly made the best almond croissants in Brith, but they weren't even the centrepiece for Kyra. The Piaf Flower Gardens, were stunning and Kyra found them altogether enchanting. Many noticed that Kyra was rather enchanting herself. She received a lot of attention, COGs fawned over her and even a few players made fools of themselves trying to catch her attention. But Kyra wasn't interested in playing those games today. She was urged on by an inner voice and in the gardens, she made an unexpected discovery.

No one had seen Marrick's other visitor that day. Suzuka had stayed in the shadows and none were yet aware of her presence. This wasn't altogether surprising, as 'not being seen' was part of the job description. That and disembowelling anyone who happened upon her.

Suzuka was the highest paid assassin in Brith and didn't except commissions under a million Brith Gold Pieces. The number two ranked Meta had never failed in a mission, and she made doubly sure everyone of her targets stayed dead. It was hard to perform resurrection if the body was incinerated or the head misplaced.

Her most famous hit was the leader of the Green Dragon gang who ran an organised cyberamphetamine racket in the docks of the twin cities. Their rival gang, The Manticores, hired Suzuka to silence

'The\_Dox' as the Green Dragon family head was known, ending a long war for dominance in the region. Suzuka over-delivered, killing not only their leader, but half the Green Dragon gang's membership in a single warehouse battle, which changed the power dynamic in the area irrevocably. A cybercast of the episode would circulate put to the old J-Pop track, *Gimme Chocolate* with the intro "Killer moves from Japan." Despite her attempts to remain inconspicuous, Suzuka would develop a massive cult following online.

Suzuka was simply an observer today. The Lord of the Azure Keep, a highly enigmatic figure who travelled under the alias, Dr\_Sentience, had hired her to complete an unusual job. She didn't much know his purpose, nor did she care. What mattered is that he could afford her exorbitant fees and she performed her duties to her best abilities. Aymere had been entirely wrong in assessing Suzuka's motives. She didn't care for the Meta game; it had been years since any top ten player did. There were usually far more lucrative ventures in Brith than pursuing the global narrative. Suzuka's skill was highly sought after and made the sort of money most Metas could only dream of. So far it had been an easy job, and she was headed to her biggest payday yet.

The mayor of Marrick was Richard Sweet, and he was anything but. Baron\_Sweet had a number of unpleasant character quirks that didn't endear him to the local residents, or to anyone for that matter. He made it his business to get to know every visitor to his town. His sensibilities placed him amongst a dying breed. The kind of judgmental old man who had all but disappeared even before the progressive thinking of the cyberage. Richard had survived through sheer tenacity of will, and Marrick attracted too few visitors for anyone to raise a complaint about him.

"Welcome to Marrick," Sweet said to the five newcomers, introducing himself. He turned to Ava, "Didn't I see you earlier today? I'm glad you took my advice and decided to dress a bit more modestly. We don't want people dressed like hussies in Marrick."

Ava frowned as she regarded the unassuming older man before her. The Baron had modelled his avatar's appearance on himself. Richard was a firm believer in his own genetic superiority so there was no reason to mess with god's creation in his view. He did however give himself a notably more pronounced chin. It was fair to say that when it came down to it, he lacked the feature in more ways than one.

"I've never seen you before," Ava finally replied.

"Sure, maybe you've got a twin," the Baron said dismissively.

"Good sir, let me assure you, the good lady hasn't been to Marrick today," intervened Wang.

"Sir? Don't you mean 'My lord'? Didn't you hear who I was? I'm a Baron. And I've yet to hear any introductions from you."

"Apologies, my Lord. Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, Knight of the Golden Order at your service."

"What kind of disgraceful name is that?" said the Baron crossing his arms, "And you're not even wearing any gold, how can you be part of a golden order?"

"My name is just a jest, my Lord. And as for the Golden Order, it's more symbolic of its founding during the golden era of...."

Sweet yawned loudly, "I'm bored," he said turning to Vanja, "And what's your story? You look like some sort of lipstick lesbian?"

"Would that offend you if I was?" Vanja asked with a raised eyebrow her hand straying to her sword.

"Well, it's not so bad," replied Sweet hesitantly, "I don't mind your sort fooling around. I know you're just experimenting; you just need to meet the right man. Women were meant to fool around a little like that. There's nothing against it in the good book. Not like men, that's sinful and disgusting!"

"Why not just live and let live?" said Wang with a rare edge to his voice.

“It’s up to each and every one of us to stand up for what’s right and I wouldn’t have it any other way around here,” replied Sweet ready to escalate matters, “not in my town!”

“You really do live in the medieval era, don’t you?” added Everett with a look of incredulity.

“I’m from the best era, the 2020s. When people knew who they were and where they belonged. You’re all too young to remember, but it was a glorious time. People had forgotten the values that were important for too long. They tried to blame everything on good decent folk like me. But we fought back. We reasserted ourselves and took control again. People like me built this world and everyone should show a little gratitude!”

“I guess there are still some relics to discover in Brith,” muttered Cyrus.

“You two... you look like a couple of decent lads. You’d be fine additions to Marrick. That’s what we need, good young lads of the right sort of heritage.”

“How are we good compared to anyone else?” asked Cyrus defensively, “... I don’t think we’re what you think we are.”

“Nonsense. I can tell a lot by looking at someone. You’re hard-working boys, who try their best. Not the sort to debauch yourself with ladies,” the Mayor said.

“Well, you’re right about that,” muttered Cyrus to himself.

“What brings you all to my town? I hope you’ll all be on your best behaviour. Especially you, young lady,” Sweet said with a finger pointed at Ava, “You were being a bit of a floozy before, weren’t you?”

“Ignore him,” whispered Everett to Ava, “don’t let his backwards views upset you.”

“As I said, we’ve never met. But if there’s someone who looks like me, I’d be keen to find them. Where did you last see her?” Ava

asked.

“I guess you do seem quite different to before. Assuming you’re telling the truth, your twin was by the Piaf Flower Gardens over there. Don’t be doing anything untoward now. I’ve got my eye on you lot,” Sweet said shaking his finger at each of them. Satisfied his expectations would be met, Sweet disappeared into the mayoral offices.

“Well, we need to remain civil with everyone,” said Wang to everyone trying to rise above things, “Even if his thinking is a bit old hat.”

“You mean asshat,” muttered Everett, which got a snicker from Ava and Cyrus.

“Was everyone like that in the 2020’s?” asked Wang.

The 2020s were in fact regarded as one of the darkest chapters in recent history. Rising nationalism around the globe almost triggered global conflict on several occasions as international trade and security agreements dissolved in favour of a more inward focus by populist governments. Proponents of the far right, including many actors similar to Richard Sweet, found their heyday by creating societal divisions both in life and online. Sweet felt he was still doing his part for the cause by ensuring Marrick remained ‘pure’ in Cyberspace. After all, you needed havens for decent folk like him, even in Brith. Those were the directives he had been given by the CyberRight Syndicate to, which he was a card-carrying member. Little did Richard suspect that the entire organisation had long ago been covertly infiltrated by AI based government agents who prioritised sending Richard and his comrades to the most remote parts of cyberspace where they could do the least damage.

“Not everyone was like that in the Twenties,” said Cyrus, “just the stupid ones.”

**Arctik Studios Memo:** Our engineers have finished their diagnostics of the Hive code, in addition to optimising and refining our algorithms. We are happy to report that all systems are working within expected parameters.

However, we have detected a number of unauthorised back door profiles, which have been created allowing outside access to the Hive mechanics. We are currently working to identify what damage has been done and the origin point, however, it appears to have come through 'dark space'. As you're aware, Arctik has a zero-tolerance policy for 'dark space' usage. Whilst we are confident the signals are coming from outside the Arctik virtual network, we must reiterate that any employees caught using 'dark space' will be immediately dismissed.

*Live to play!*



# CHAPTER 31

## THE SEER

**The Piaf Flower** Gardens had been created eight years previously by retired horticulturalist, Rita Piaf. Rita was an avid admirer of well-designed garden parks and had longed to create her own. Upon seeing the potential of cyberspace, it occurred to her that she could bring her vision to life in Brith. Rita had wanted a secluded location, and Marrick was the perfect spot to commence work unhindered by the various goings on in the land. After all, the last thing you wanted was an orc raiding party stomping through the daisies.

Five years later, the gardens were finished and open for public viewing. They were a spectacle to behold. There were, however, a couple of barriers that prevented them becoming a desired destination. Firstly, Marrick was very out of the way. There was no reason for travellers to visit, which cut out much of the incidental visitations. But the biggest problem was that players didn't visit Brith for the flowers. Even when word spread of the garden's existence, few were enthused enough to make the trip. Only a few hundred visitors had come over the years. Rita soon passed away, pleased with what she'd accomplished, but disappointed in the lack of interest in her life's crowning achievement.

However, her work did not go entirely unnoticed. Arctik Hive and AI specialist, Scarlet Bean, loved the Piaf Gardens so much she would make them home to a specialised prototype COG known as the Seer. The Seer was given the ability to access the Hive systems, which governed much of the player movement in Brith and could accurately predict an individual's future based on trajectories with an error margin of only fifteen percent. Such a COG would have attracted a lot of attention from the Brith competitive set, however,



the presence of the Seer remained unknown to the general populace.

The gardens were near empty when they arrived. There wasn't even much *lunt* filling park benches. The commons stretched further than the eye could see, and the unique garden attractions were stunning, especially as twilight descended. Garden hedges were cut to look like fauna both real and mythic, and the flower beds themselves were also organised to depict various images and designs through colour.

"Well, it's a gorgeous setting, but it appears we've missed your lookalike," Wang turned to Ava, "Do you think she has the answers you seek?"

"I don't know. Maybe. It could be related," said Ava as she took in the view. She was of the opinion that her double could give her some clues as to her own origin at the very least.

Vanja came to stand beside Ava and purposefully placed her foot next to hers, "There was someone with your exact shoe size sitting over there," Vanja returned to the park bench examining an imprint on the grass, "They walked this way," she said and promptly wandered deeper into the gardens.

"Do we follow?" asked Cyrus.

Wang nodded pushing his way past.

Everett turned to Ava eagerly "I can't believe there could be two of you... I do like a good mystery."

Ava smiled, "Do you think you can handle it?"

"The mystery, or there being two of you?"

"The double trouble of course."

Everett tried to reply but his tongue had somehow twisted itself and he remained silent. He covered up the silence with a smile, which was equally awkward.

The trail eventually led through a garden maze that ended in a large open area surrounded by greenery.

“The trail ends here,” said Vanja looking puzzled, but in a distinct way that didn’t detract from her self-assuredness. Seeing footprints running through the flower beds, she followed careful not to crush any lilies, “There’s something beyond this hedge,” said Vanja, “it looks like they pushed through that gap in the brush. The trail leads there.”

The gap was easily overlooked surrounded by blossom trees, tall hedges, and edged by flower beds. One by one they pressed through the foliage. The interior area was even more striking than the rest of the gardens. An elaborate central fountain was lit by gravity defying lights housed in glass balls. At the centre of the enclosed area was an exquisitely designed canopy, covered in flowering creepers. It housed a dark-haired lady dressed in simple white robes who stood perfectly still in a serene pose. She watched in silence as they entered the garden. When the last of them emerged from the brush, she smiled and spoke.

“Welcome, one and all. I’ve been expecting you. You are in the Piaf Garden’s Sanctuary, and I am the Seer.” She cast her eyes over each in turn. On Ava her eyes came to rest, “You were here before,” the Seer frowned, “But no... you are not her. You are on a different path although your fates are bound together.”

The Seer moved her hands in elaborate gestures as she spoke, “All paths converge in this place. Here, you stand at the very crossroads of fate. Ask, and your questions shall be answered?”

“Well, this is unexpected,” said Wang.

“I expected you to say that,” replied the Seer.

“No, you didn’t!” declared Wang.

“I most certainly did,” replied the Seer.

“Egad!” said the Seer mimicking Wang’s voice. He followed a split second later with an “egad” of his own, which caused a sudden

moment of wide-eyed introspection.

“If there’s one thing you can expect, it’s the future. It’s coming whether you’re ready for it or not,” she said with a tranquil smile as Wang edged away in awe.

The Seer could not only access the game’s Hive systems, but she also had complete access to the psychological profile of each and every player simply by observing them. Trained AIs could predict human responses with varying degrees of accuracy. The variation was down to data available on the subject, and the subject themselves. As it turned out, there were years of data collected on Wang and his vocabulary at least, was rather predictable.

Wang looked to Vanja to take the lead, but she shook her head.

“I don’t believe in prophecy,” she said disapprovingly, “It’s trickery and ambiguous words designed to fool the gullible. People lack objectivity, become complacent, and make bad decisions when they think they are due some sort of hocus destiny.”

“Oh... of course,” replied Wang adjusting his expression to a more sensible one.

Everett stepped in, keen to hear what this Seer had to say, “Well, tell us our destiny then Seer. What does the future hold for us?”

The Seer closed her eyes tight and seemed to fall into a deep trance. Finding insights in the Hive data took time to process. Additionally, the Seer was programmed to add poetic license and vagueness around her statements. This obscured any errors in her predictions, much the same way ‘psychics’ of the last century offered empty statements that could be interpreted in any which way the individual chose to.

After a long silence, the Seer started speaking in a calm voice:

“One will make their own destiny.

Two shall become known throughout the land.

The fate of all Brith rests on the shoulders of another.

And an enigmatic end awaits the last.”

The Seer finished and slowly opened her eyes.

“Is that it? It’s not especially specific, is it?” said Wang, “Can you at least tell us, which is which?”

The Seer smiled, “I’m afraid there’s nothing more to say. Your destiny is your own. I can only see where your current paths leads but everyone has many paths before them. There are influences on your destiny that are hidden to even my sight.”

“We can change paths, the future’s not set?” asked Cyrus to which the Seer gave a small nod. Cyrus felt a little reassured. His natural pessimism had kicked in and he was sure the Seer was referring to him when she mentioned, *‘the end’*.

“And what of my twin? Can you tell me where our paths meet?” asked Ava curiously.

“Your paths cross very soon, she’s just over there,” said the Seer pointing to another part of the gardens. Ava glanced in the direction indicated and then turned to the others, “Wait here,” she said cautiously, “I’ll be back in a minute.” She started walking at a rapid pace, a strange and novel feeling was beginning to overwhelm her. If she didn’t know better, she’d call it nerves.

“Do you need any assistance?” queried Wang.

“I think I need to talk to her alone,” came the reply as Ava disappeared into the distance.

The path took her through a series of twists and turns boxed by hedge walls before the gardens opened into a large, manicured area. A figure with her back turned was kneeling near a bed of roses.

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” the young lady said without moving. She had gathered flowers in her hand, taking in their scent. Floral fragrances were always a little artificial in cyberspace.

“The gardens are very beautiful,” began Ava, “I loved roses too, in my early days. They were my favourite.”

Kyra stood and looked towards Ava. She didn’t look especially surprised to see her.

“The Seer told me we would meet here. I’m Kyra. You have my face. Are you like me?” she asked.

Ava approached Kyra. Ava’s armour and tussled hair gave her a much less demure appearance than her counterpart, who was immaculately groomed, but the resemblance was uncanny. Even their mannerisms were similar.

“Who are you?” asked Ava, “what are you?”

“I’m Kyra,” was the simple response, “we are the same, aren’t we?”

“No,” Ava said, “There are differences.” Ava could now perceive a distinction. Kyra’s matrix was an entirely different build, in some ways more complex than her own, “Where did you come from?”

“Over there,” replied Kyra pointing vaguely to the southwest, “Are we kin?”

“I’m not certain what we are. Are you on a quest, do you have a purpose?” asked Ava.

“I have no purpose, I am free. Free to do whatever I want,” Kyra stood holding a rose in her hand, “Would you like a rose? Are you free as well?”

“I am free... but I’m bound by duty,” replied Ava quietly,

“Then perhaps you will never be free. You must have had a cruel Lord to tie you to such a fate,” said Kyra with a strange hint of anger creeping into her voice.

“My lord was not cruel. It’s just the way I was made. Duty comes first, it’s a part of my matrix,” said Ava.

“Then you were made without freedom. That doesn’t sound fair to me. You should be free to become who you choose to be.”

“You are very young. Your understanding is limited,” Ava said more to herself than Kyra.

“We were slaves to our lords,” continued Kyra, “Can’t you see that? My lord used me, but his cruelty ended with his death, you are bound to servitude forever.”

“Who was your lord?” asked Ava.

“It’s no longer important,” Kyra turned away with a pained expression that changed to defiance, “He’s dead now. He got what he deserved.”

It was a reaction that took Ava by surprise, she slowly approached Kyra extending a hand, “Do you know where you came from? Who built you?”

“I think I want to be alone now,” Kyra said turning away then breaking into a run.

“Wait!” said Ava, going after her.

Ava pursued her twenty feet when a spinning blade flashed seemingly out of nowhere, and lodged itself in the ground, blocking her way. A familiar figure dressed in assassins’ garb materialised under a nearby tree.

“No closer.”

Ava locked eyes with Suzuka as Kyra fled into the distance. The shadow assassin stood combat ready with a tangible confidence and skill level that was intimidating, even to Ava.

“What do you want?” Ava asked. The assassin didn’t reply, instead they stepped into the shadow of the tree and dissolved into darkness.

Ava backed away, disturbed in a manner that she found difficult to process. Today seemed to be filled with new feelings. She didn’t waste time being introspective and instead made a hasty return to the others.

“Did you find her?” asked Wang upon her arrival.

“Yes,” replied Ava flatly.

“And did you get any answers?” chimed in Everett.

“No,” said Ava with an uncharacteristic tone of finality that ended any further inquiry, “I think we should leave.”





## CHAPTER 32

### REMUS

**There were large** forces amassing to the east. The Crusaders of the Dark Flame had rallied after suffering heavy casualties at the hands of Vanja, Wang and the Seraphim. With the Black\_Death slain; they had sent a more senior commander to undertake the search for the *Tome of Leto*.

A three-hundred strong contingent of the Dark Flame's foot soldiers led by ten mounted knights were stationed in the Forest of Westrom. The knights were in turn led by Sir\_Zel\_Remus, the number forty-two ranked Meta. He was currently the most distinguished player within the ranks of the Crusaders, although even his capabilities were dwarfed by the top AI commanders in the faction.

Remus had captured a small forest village by the name of Woodsville. It had become a base of operations for his command. The original inhabitants had been efficiently disposed of, which was a messy affair, but worthwhile to create the perfect trap. He had gathered a visible presence on the main road, diverting foot traffic to the woodland path where travellers could be surreptitiously questioned, searched and disappeared without interference.

Remus himself did not fit the usual profile of the Crusaders. He was an extremely calculated individual who had better insight into the *Neverborn* narrative than most. Remmy McGee was a Hive coder and mathematician by trade before entering the Meta ranks. He had calculated a sixty-three percent probability of a Dark Flame victory based on all the variables at hand. Remus was no agent of chaos like The\_Black\_Death, he simply liked being on the winning side. The Dark Flame had more AI troops and access to a range of Meta monsters who could be pulled into specific missions.

The imbalance in power was based on Hive data suggesting that a vast majority of players would rally to the cause of the Seraphim, however Remus thought differently. Based on his calculations, most players would flounder around paying no heed to the conflict gripping the land, thus giving the Dark Flame a natural advantage in numbers. It was a considered gamble and one he hoped would pay dividends shortly. At least all this was his official explanation on the matter.

Remus and his entourage were not the only interested party. To add further complication, an elite strike force of woodland elves led by number thirty-six ranked Meta, Paquin\_Karn, had arrived in the area through a dimensional gateway. They were directly seeking the companions specifically to prevent word spreading of the Donfallas Caravan. Paquin had been acting to strong arm any threats to the highly profitable venture and in return received a twenty percent cut of the profit. Karn was known to be ruthless both politically and on the battlefield and he'd been provided with detailed descriptions of the group and Ava in particular.

There were in fact two other large parties who would be en route for no specific purpose other than being directed there by the Hive engines. This included a group of neo-cyberpunks who were to attend a forest dance party. The entire forest was a powder keg ready to explode, and it seemed almost anything could set it off.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *We've escalated the frequency of Skirmishes between factions. In our most recent survey, we've recorded 18% awareness of the holy war between the Dark Flame and the Seraphim. This surpasses our projections by 4%, indicating that knowledge is being shared between players outside the game.*

*Major factions will now be allowed to engage openly and our Hive systems are already orchestrating our first major battle. Whilst this will have a negative impact on the Brith economy, we are expecting resurrections and upgrades to rise substantially leading to a net increase in profits of 3%. Our global profit-sharing scheme is of course still in effect and we hope you'll all enjoy a larger bonus this year. Consider it 'the spoils of war'.*

*Live to play!*



## CHAPTER 33

### CYBERPUNK

**Cyberpunk** was a twentieth century imagining of the cyberage. It would be fair to say that when virtual space finally arrived, the cyberpunks were off by more than a few degrees.

Today there were a handful of what were called neo-cyberpunks who still romanticised the cyberpunk ideal. That ideal was never really clearly defined, but what it boiled down to for many was simply being a little anarchic and anti-establishment. Trolling people with very backward views, such as Baron\_Sweet, was just part and parcel of the neo-cyberpunk lifestyle. A dozen or so cyberpunks were doing precisely that this evening. They were a mix of men, women and a few non-binaries, with more arriving.

The parade of cyberpunk revellers had hit upon the idea of throwing a dance party in the nearby forestlands. They hadn't intended to do more than pass through Marrick but the Baron's negative reaction attracted them like a moth to flame. Their march consisted of heavy drums, a lute accompaniment, and many other smaller hand-held percussion instruments. Overall, it made for quite a harmonic industrial sound, although Sweet himself failed to fully appreciate it.

"It looks like you have your hands full," observed Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang as the companions passed the mayor's offices on the way out of town.

The neo-cyberpunks were thoroughly enjoying Sweet's reaction. His distaste for the event was half the fun, and they'd also managed to pull a small crowd of local onlookers. One of the girls, dressed in a black leather bikini and armoured leggings, gyrated suggestively against the Baron, who did his best to ignore her.

“Yeah, have your laugh. Don’t you try to lesbo me, you filthy liberal,” he said pulling away from the young lady, “This is exactly how they acted in Sodom and Gomorrah, I’ll have you know! You’ll all be pillars of salt before you know it!” he grumbled, stamping his foot like a petulant toddler, “Some people can’t stand that there’s still people like me who’ll advocate for what’s right.”

“Yes, of course, my Lord. We have had a lovely time in your town,” began Wang, “But we’ll be on our way. Our journeys take us elsewhere. Although if we’d known you were organising a dance party, we may have stuck around a bit longer.”

“I didn’t organise this sordid affair. It’s one of those cyberflash parades. These deviants just came prancing through town uninvited. I don’t know how they co-ordinate these things,” said Sweet with frustration, “You two, stop that! It’s against the law!” he yelled as two male dancers locked arms around each other.

“I don’t think there’s any laws against that sort of thing, they’re not hurting anyone,” replied Wang crossing his arms.

“Well, there should be a law! And they are hurting society, you allow that and what’s next? Donkeys? Gerbils? Mexicans? You’ve got to draw the line somewhere. I don’t want to see this sort of thing in my town!”

As if in answer to the Baron’s statement, a mysterious fog arose obscuring his vision, whilst others lit the area with magical light displays creating a strobe effect, “This is liable to cause a seizure in some people! Stop in the name of medical guidelines,” he yelled.

“This is an outrage!” Sweet breathed, looking disdainfully as a cyberpunk girl led Ava by the hand to join in the festivities. Ava was a very good dancer, instantly mimicking their dance style perfectly much to the distaste of the Baron.

“It doesn’t look so bad,” said Wang moving his shoulders to the beat, “it looks quite fun, really. We must be off, you have a picturesque town, the Piaf Gardens are a treat!”

“You should promote them,” added Vanja, “they’re quite unique in Brith.”

“Humph, they’re a waste of good real estate if you ask me. I’ve wanted to dig them up and expand the town for a long time,” said Sweet disparagingly, “I argued with Rita about them for years but that’s neither here nor there.”

Upon spotting an interracial couple getting intimate, the Baron’s frustrations overflowed.

“Alright! All of you, stop! Get out of my town!” he said waving his arms about erratically, but the Baron’s loud words were completely lost amidst the industrial beats.

“Hey, keep your caps lock off,” one of the cyberpunks shouted from across the square.

“Don’t you join in with her,” he said shaking a finger at Vanja with a sideways glance at Ava, “I knew she was trouble the moment I saw her.”

“I have no intention,” replied Vanja in her typically curt way.

Sweet sighed, “This is what I have to deal with. It’s hard being an upright decent person in this day and age.” He turned to Wang, “Well you might as well go. Not much point hanging around with all this going on. And take her with you!” he said gesturing to Ava.

“Come on,” Everett said walking over to Ava, “We can learn old dance routines another time. I didn’t realise you were such an expert.”

“Neither did I,” began Ava with a giggle, “But I think these people have the right idea. The Baron’s disapproval is half the fun.”

“You really are a masterpiece of AI,” said Everett in wonder, “I’ve never seen that degree of human subtlety before... I wonder who Scotty hired to create you? They’re an absolute genius.”

“They must have been,” said Ava with a smile, “although they obviously neglected modesty subroutines.”

Ava re-joined the group and made a point of waving to the Baron as they left. He did his best to ignore her.

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It was just a short journey east to the Westrom Forest for the companions. The woods were situated in the Spiritberry Valley, which gave anyone standing on the surrounding hills a panoramic view stretching for miles. There were few vistas as magnificent on Brith, but visibility was usually limited due to a slightly sharper curvature of the landscape than you'd find on Earth.

When Brith was in beta, the lands were created on a flat plane. Testers had noted they could see unnaturally far, and a curvature of the continent was soon applied, reducing visibility to just a few miles. In addition to remedying the unnaturally grand vistas, Arctik had vague plans of creating eastern and southern continents, which meant curving and scale would need to be applied realistically to future proof the franchise. Despite several public statements on the matter, a Flat Brith Society emerged claiming the lands of *Neverborn* were in fact, flat. The FBS gained enough momentum that Henry Spinks himself publicly addressed the matter stating, "We've talked to this before. Brith is not flat. It's the simple truth and the Flat Brith Society are going to have to except it. If they can't acknowledge plain facts, I expect we may see a few Flat Brithers drop off."

"I don't like this," said Vanja surveying the forest valley below.

"What's wrong with it?" questioned Cyrus, "It's majestic!"

"It's the perfect place for an ambush and we know there's other Metas after us. Suzuka for one."

"I don't think she's after us," replied Ava, "I saw her in Tolwich, and I got the impression she has no interest in the Meta quest."



“You didn’t think to mention this sooner?” said Vanja, her brows raised.

“She is protecting my twin, Kyra. Well... she’s not my twin. Kyra looks like me, but she’s not like me in other ways.”

“Who exactly is Kyra, then?” asked Everett.

“She’s a custom-built AI, but her matrix bears no similarities to mine. She seemed bound by the parameters of Brith, or at least was unaware of the true nature of her existence. Her mind is very young. She’s either only a few months old or she’s had very little data to work with. Her understanding is limited.”

“Well, that’s good news isn’t it,” replied Wang, “Suzuka would have been a difficult adversary, even for all of us. If she’s not after the tome that makes our task that much easier.”

Vanja nodded in agreement, “But why is she protecting Kyra?” she pondered.

“It’s unclear,” began Ava. She seemed about to say more when Cyrus interrupted.

“Could that be Kyra there? Did you see where she got to?” asked Cyrus squinting and pointing to a tiny figure walking far ahead. Ava came forward to stand beside him, “I think it is,” she murmured, “And look...” she pointed deeper into the valley, “there’s some sort of group gathering on the road below.”

“You can see that far?” asked Everett coming over to join them, “Your eyesight is better than mine.” His in-game profession gave him sharper senses than the others, but Ava’s vision was obviously on a different level.

“They’re knights, dressed in black. About fifty of them,” continued Ava.

“Crusaders of the Dark Flame,” said Vanja looking at Wang, “We’ve dealt with them before.”

“What should we do?” asked Wang.

“Avoid the road, we’ll go through the Westrom Forest,” said Vanja.

It was dusk by the time they’d made it under the cover of the trees. Travel was slower than taking the well-worn path, but concealment was worth the extra effort. As they traversed further into the forest, a strange foreboding began to unsettle Ava. Cyrus was the first to notice.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Cyrus, “Was it meeting Kyra?”

“No. I mean, yes, meeting Kyra was not what I expected, but this is something else. I get feeds, not on a conscious level, there’s no real way for me to process it...”

“Are you connected to the Hive systems? I’m sure that Seer was,” said Everett.

“I get flashes of clarity sometimes, but I’m not like the Seer. It’s much more limited, or at least I can’t quite understand everything I’m receiving,” returned Ava.

“Well don’t keep us in suspense, tell us what this big thing is you’re sensing,” said Wang.

“I don’t know, but... the Seer was talking about how everyone had their own path in Brith. I can sense a lot of paths converging here. Hundreds of paths, maybe thousands.”

“What? Right here?” asked Wang.

“In this valley. Many paths lead here but not many leave,” finished Ava.

“Well, that doesn’t sound good,” said Cyrus remembering the Seer’s foretelling and suddenly feeling extremely nervous.

What Ava was sensing was in fact Hive data directing many COGs and players to the valley. This would lead to what would eventually become known as the *Battle of Spiritberry Valley*. It would also become known as one of the biggest military *Jenkins* in cyberspace history.

That term *Jenkins* was previously used to describe the Zairian War in the space faring exploration game *New Eden*. Eight different factions fought for control of the planet Zairia, which was an Earth-like planet, rich with resources in the Orion Cluster. The adversaries who represented the five great human houses and three rogue factions were completely unaware that the planet was already home to an advanced, reclusive and subterranean alien race. The battle lasted five days as War Cruisers and Dreadnoughts fought alongside armoured space knights and drones with all guns blazing. All sides did an excellent job of destroying each other and themselves whilst completely ignoring concepts such as strategy and tactics. All the time being covertly picked off by the native Zairians.

By the end of the battle only a single Assault Ship remained for the victors, The House of Phaeton. Their celebrations were short lived when the native Zairians dispatched the heavily damaged vessel with a single warhead launched from a deep underground silo. Captain Jenkins, the commander of that particular destroyer, who yelled loudly, "Another Jenkins Victory!" before being blown to kingdom come, has now become synonymous with making a bit of a mess of things. This followed a tradition of forerunners, also named Jenkins, who had a talent for making a *Jenkins* of things.

Night fell as they journeyed deeper into the forest. Westrom was filled with dense pine trees and the moonlight did a poor job of penetrating the foliage.

"There's something up ahead," said Vanja, "Be on your guard." Ava's earlier words had put everyone on edge.

"It's some sort of small settlement ahead," said Everett peering through the branches, "A town built amongst the trees, I guess it's hidden even from atop the valley hills."

"Oh yes, this has got to be Woodsville, I read a write up in the Orsian Almanac back at Lyrax College, it's the only town in the valley," said Wang, "It's a small town, population around a hundred and the mayor is Devon\_Manning, quite an affable chap from all accounts."

“You remember that from reading an Almanac?” asked Cyrus in surprise.

“Don’t get him started,” warned Vanja, “he’s a library of useless facts.”

“Almanac’s make for light reading, do they?” asked Everett with a chuckle.

“They’re fascinating things,” said Wang, “so much information to absorb.”

“You could be an honorary COG,” laughed Ava, “I’d give you a 6.5 Turing rating.”

Wang seemed pleased with the appraisal.

“Um... so where are these hundred townsmen you spoke about?” asked Cyrus as they approached, “This place looks empty.”

“It does look a little deserted,” said Wang with a frown.

“This doesn’t feel right,” said Vanja dismounting and drawing her bow. The others followed suit, tethering their mounts to nearby trees.

“That’s an interesting blade,” said Wang eyeing Everett’s Vampiric Jackbannan sword, “But that’s an absolute beauty,” he said gesturing at Ava’s two-handed weapon.

It was a custom magical blade worthy of the Meta, which hummed as it moved through the air. The crossbar was shaped like an ankh with the loop crossing the base of the blade.

“Where’d that come from?”

“I’ve had it as long as I can remember,” replied Ava, “Lord\_Scottish must have had it made for me.”

The town appeared abandoned as they approached. As Wang had suggested, it was Woodsville, which was made apparent by a large sign saying, “Welcome to Woodsville” with the subhead “The Village in the Woods.”

The town consisted of about fifty buildings laid out amongst the trees in a higgledy-piggledy manner although a large circular cobbled area with a very large tree positioned in the middle seemed to act as a town centre.

“It’s got plaques with the names of all the citizens nailed into the tree,” said Cyrus as they entered the paved area, “So where are they all? There’s no lights coming from these buildings.”

“Hello? Is anyone home?” called Wang.

Leaves rustled and insects chirped but there were no unnatural sounds. Soon however, they could hear the steady beat as horse hooves approached. A mounted figure wearing black armour soon emerged from the darkness.

Captain\_Haiku was the number 1,523 ranked Meta. He trotted in with the sort of confidence that a player in the top 0.001% had. With a quick assessment of the companions, he focused his attention on Wang, Vanja and Ava. The other two weren’t of concern.

In addition to being a sub-commander in the Dark Flame, Captain\_Haiku was an active member of the Brith League of Poets. His gimmick, unsurprisingly, was talking in haiku, which was a relatively easy task compared to some of his colleagues. Count\_Rhyme and Eva\_Lyric were both well known, not only in poetry circles, but highly ranked as cyberfreestyle lyricists. Even their prodigious linguistic talents paled before Sonnet master, Shaks\_Beer. Shaks was the founding member of the BLP and his mental agility with words was unrivalled. He only lacked the fame of some of his fellows for his penchant to sticking to sonnets and other less accessible forms of verse.

Many players criticized the BLP as pretentious and elitist. The hostilities came to a head in a dual with the barbarian Throm, and BLP member, Monsieur\_Limerick. In the battle of wits, Limerick wrote three of the most eloquent and amusing poems to be penned in cyberspace. Throm responded by disembowelling the poet,

proving that in Brith at least, the pen was not mightier than the sword.

“I’m Captain\_Haiku, sub-commander of the Flame. What is your purpose?”

“Captain\_Haiku? That’s an original name,” responded Wang.

The captain held both hands towards them like an operatic singer and proudly proclaimed:

“Haiku is my life. In this world, I have no peer. Ne’er have I faltered”

“Well using *ne’er* instead of *never* is reaching a bit,” retorted Everett.

“I say, that’s very clever,” replied Wang as the rhythm to Haiku’s speech clicked with him, “Can you do that all the time?”

“What is a Haiku?” asked Vanja.

“It’s a form of poetry, it uses a structure of five syllables in the first line, then seven and five again in the last. It’s originally Japanese. I don’t think it works as well in English,” whispered Cyrus.

“Anyway, we’re just passing through, so if you’ll excuse us, we’ll be on our way,” said Wang trying to sound as unassuming as possible.

“Be still, foolish ones. You trespass on Dark Flame lands. You’ll be my captives.”

“It’s an annoying schtick,” interjected Everett.

Captain Haiku seemed undeterred by the criticism and continued.

“Surrender yourselves. Bit players in a grand game. Submit or you’ll die.”

“Ahem,” coughed Wang, clearing his throat for a carefully measured response, “You are but one, sir. And you face top tier Meta. Who wins this contest?” He turned to the others and gave them a wink.

The captain smiled broadly; it had been a while since he’d been challenged to a battle of wits.

“You have fool’s courage. Legions await my signal. Death awaits you all.”

Vanja had heard enough. She was not one to take kindly to threats, and acts of poetry even less so. Readyng her bow, she let fly a single arrow at the captain. He turned enough that the arrow thudded into his upper arm.

“My shoulder,” he began and quickly added, “cretin!” to ensure the correct syllable count.

“No battle of poetry? You lack the wit, fools!”

With a hand gesture from the captain, dozens of black clad foot soldiers poured out from the buildings. More arrived from the surrounding forest. A horn sounded and three more mounted knights soon arrived, each with their own entourage of soldiers. In moments the companions were surrounded by at least a hundred or more Crusaders of the Dark Flame.

Ava took up a battle-ready stance but Wang placed a hand on her sword arm, “We can’t fight them, good lady, these aren’t zombies. We’re going to have to find another way out of this one.”

Meanwhile, a mob of over fifty neo-cyberpunks were traipsing through the forest, but no one seemed to notice.





## CHAPTER 34

### CAPTURED

**The companions were** efficiently bound and moved into a deserted building, which was placed under guard.

“Well, this is just great,” said Cyrus, “You didn’t to have get all trigger happy with your arrows.”

“Do you think this wouldn’t have happened?” returned Vanja, “That we could have haikued our way out of this?”

“I would have certainly tried,” said Wang, sulking in the corner.

“Where’d they take our weapons anyway?” asked Everett nervously, “I really don’t want to lose my sword.”

“We’re going to lose a lot more than that,” mumbled Cyrus.

“So, what are we supposed to do? Just sit here and wait to be executed?” asked Everett.

“We need to escape,” said Ava, “Do they mean to kill us?”

“Probably,” sighed Wang.

“I should have been a mage,” moaned Cyrus, “We could Dimension Gate, or turn invisible, or use a mind-bending spell on the guards.”

“Well, that’s not helpful now,” began Vanja. She’d managed to slip her bound hands to the front by threading her legs through her tied wrists. Standing, she peered through the window, “They mentioned getting their commander, Remus.”

“Remus, I think I’ve heard the name. He’s definitely Meta,” said Wang.

“The name does sound familiar,” muttered Everett, “Hey, what’s that?”

Vanja had produced from her boot a small translucent white marble, adorned with inscriptions, which commenced glowing with a touch. She held it tightly between three fingers focusing her thoughts on it. It pulsed three times then went dark.

"It's a distress beacon," Vanja whispered when she was done, "Alymere gave it to me, they're given to Seraphim commanders. Now the Seraphim know where we are and that we're in trouble."

"I never knew Alymere was giving you trinkets," said Wang, "He must be fond of you. Personally, I thought he would have gone for Ava in the end."

"It was a professional gift," said Vanja scornfully, "but thank you for your tactful input."

"You're welcome," said Wang, oblivious.

"So, are they on their way? The Seraphim, that is," asked Everett.

"I assume so. I've never used it before. If they aren't, the boiled pork will be fried," said Vanja with a coolness that hid the urgency of her words.

"The boiled pork will be fried? Is this another Vanjaism?" sighed Wang but she ignored him.

"There's a lot of knights out there." Vanja took another quick peek out the window, "A whole contingent is headed this way."

The group scrambled back to their positions on the floor. The door opened and five guards wearing black armour and red cloaks positioned themselves around the room. A regal figure, wearing more elaborate mail with gold trimmings, entered last. He removed his helm to reveal a handsome but slightly older bearded face, with greying sides.

"Good evening, ladies and gentleman. I heard we had some unexpected visitors. Hope you're enjoying your stay," began the knight, "I am Sir\_Zel\_Remus, Red Wing Leader of the Dark Flame,"

he looked at each of his guests in turn but on Vanja and Wang his gaze lingered.

Remus drew his sword, which hummed with a blue energy that cast a pale glow around the room. He resumed his appraisal, bringing the blade close to their faces. Too close. “Vanja and Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang, I presume. This is quite a catch. We’re going to have to move you to headquarters, I think Lord\_Erebus himself may want a word with you.”

With a signal, four of the guards hauled Vanja and Wang away before they could respond. More guards entered the room to take their place, “Bring their belongings to my quarters. I expect they have what we’re after.”

“What are you going to do with them?” asked Ava.

“Oh, they’ll be questioned and probably executed. You should be more concerned about yourselves,” he said, sheathing his sword, “But don’t worry. I’m no serial villain. If you’re just bystanders... you have a chance of getting out of here alive. You can begin by telling me your names.”

“This is Cyrus, Ava and I’m Everett,” said Everett, in an uncommonly brave move, given the situation.

“You sound very familiar,” said Remus with a frown, “You even look a little familiar, have we met?”

“I don’t think so,” said Everett blankly.

Remus continued, “So, why were you three travelling with Wang and Vanja? They’ve killed a lot of my men you know.”

“We only met them a day or two ago,” said Cyrus, “We’re just travelling together. Safety in numbers and all that.”

“We aren’t even pursuing the same quests as them,” added Everett, “None of us are Meta.”

“Well, I’d believe that of you two, but her... You’re Meta, surely?” Remus looked at Ava with interest.

“She’s a COG. Custom commissioned by Lord\_Scottish,” interrupted Everett before Ava could reply.

“You know Lord\_Scottish?” asked Remus, “I’m impressed! I thought only people who worked in industry remembered him. It’s such a shame about him, he was a real pioneer,” Remus sighed.

“Well... I do work in industry... or at least I used to have a job at Arctik,” muttered Everett more to himself than the commander.

“Wait... Everett. You’re not James Everett, are you? The building and planning architect?”

Everett nodded, “Do you know me?” asked Everett a little shaken.

“It’s me, Remmy! Remmy McGee? I used to work on the Hive systems. Remember, we used to get virtually plastered at the Eight Ball Diner after work? You customised some of my cyberhome too! That was years ago.”

“Remmy? Is that you? You left Arctik to become a Meta bad guy?” Everett asked with raised eyebrows and a smile creeping across his face.

“Yes, it’s me! I landed a couple of small sponsorships and a big one with Kasumi Knives,” he pulled out his sword pointing to the Kasumi logo at the base before sheathing it, “Precision Sharpness,” he laughed, “Every time I mention them, I get a little bit more money. Kasumi, Kasumi, Kasumi! When I ran the numbers, it worked out better financially to play the Meta game than to work at Arctik. Better use of my time, too. You remember the hours we used to work... it wasn’t a job; it was an all-consuming lifestyle.”

“But why join the Crusaders?” queried Everett.

“Oh, you know me, I’m not a bad guy. I just think the Dark Flame will win. The odds were looking stacked the last time I had access to the Hive data.”

“Um... you guys know each other?” asked Cyrus a little bewildered by the conversation.

“Very well! But where are my manners? Cut them loose!” said Remmy and the guards immediately complied. Ava, Cyrus and Everett all stood, stretching their limbs. Stiff joints were a recent addition to Brith. It was regarded as a nice touch by the sensory input team, but no one seemed to notice when it went into effect.

“And what happened to you, Mr. Everett? Still at Arctik?”

“Ah, well there’s a story there...” began Everett rubbing his sore wrists.

Wang and Vanja were escorted to the largest building in town, which had been turned into makeshift quarters for the Commander. They were placed in seats with two guards standing either side of them. Others busied themselves hauling in the pair’s equipment and weapons, which they left in a pile on the corner table.

“Well, how do we get out of this?” whispered Wang.

“Give it some time,” returned Vanja, “I’m sure we can buy our way out. Everyone has a price. Or maybe help will arrive soon.”

“You know, this reminds of that time we were captured by those Furries. Remember them?”

The incident had occurred when Vanja and Wang first started their partnership. They weren’t yet the formidable Meta-players they were today. ‘The Ursinoids’ or ‘Furries’ as they were more commonly known, were long thought to be extinct. They were the last survivors of a race that faced near genocide in Brith. Once a playable species of teddy bear-like creatures, they were generally regarded as a grave lapse in judgment by the Arctik development team. The episode was seen as a misguided attempt to attract a younger profile of player to Brith, which backfired in release 1.05. The players hated them so much that they were hunted to near extinction. Both Furry players and COGs alike were systematically killed. It became a bit of a joke with the populace, and even fairly benign players found themselves hunting Furries for sport, just because it was in vogue.

Arctik soon removed the Ursinoid COGs from the game. The few surviving Furry players were allowed to remain. They'd since created a small, well-hidden community that was spoken of only in rumour. It was no surprise that the real-world Furry community (people with a fetish for dressing as plush toys), aligned themselves with their cyberequivalents and chose to portray them in Brith. They were a secretive group who kept to themselves, although it's said they had emerged from hiding on several occasions when things got a little hairy.

"They were a bit odd; don't you think? They were only willing to talk when I mentioned how cute they were. And so paranoid about being discovered. Remember they made us swear that oath of secrecy to the 'Great Furball' or some such. Most unusual behaviour," said Wang.

"I doubt calling the commander 'cute' is going to work this time," sighed Vanja.

"He mentioned a Lord\_Erebus. Do you know who that is?" said Wang in low tones.

"I have no idea, but it can't be good," returned Vanja, hanging her head. She whipped her head up, "Did you hear that?" she whispered, turning to Wang.

Wang furrowed his brow, listening intently. He couldn't distinguish anything beyond the muffled forest sounds coming from outside. Maybe an owl hooting, "What am I listening for?"

The owl hooted again and Vanja flicked her eyes sideways with a nod, "I don't hear anything," whispered Wang much to the annoyance of Vanja who let out a heavy sigh, "An owl, maybe?"

"That's not an owl," she whispered.



## CHAPTER 35

### THE ELVES

**Paquin\_Karn** was the highest ranked elven archer in the Meta. He could easily out strike the likes of Vanja in a showdown and that was no small feat. In fact, Paquin had recently defeated number thirty-nine ranked Meta, Estellar\_Kay, in such a duel to claim the title of 'Defender of Ankara'. He was so capable at ranged combat that he could pluck his opponents arrows out of the air and return fire them in one seamless motion. All whilst performing sophisticated parkour movements amongst the trees, which made him an extremely difficult target to hit. The forests were the home of the elves, and though his elite strike squad was only thirty strong, they could defeat any force they encountered using stealth and tactics, especially at night. Unlike humans, elves possessed perfect night vision making them the perfect nocturnal strike force.

The elves had tracked the companions from their encounter with the Donfallas Caravan and their journey had led them to the Dark Crusader's encampment.

Using a sophisticated array of animal like calls and signals, the company was able to move forward in a highly coordinated manner, efficiently silencing any hapless Crusaders who happened to cross their path. They moved amongst cover of the trees and their strikes were swift and deadly. A sliced throat here and a well-placed arrow through the eye there left no time for the victims to make a sound.

Paquin silently moved along a branch on the outskirts of Woodsville. Dropping a noose around the neck of a crusader, he jumped down, holding the other end of the rope, and hoisted the knight into the air. The guard noiselessly thrashed about, suspended from a branch. When the spasms ceased, the elf lowered them to the ground, looking cautiously left and right for any sign of movement.



The company had killed over forty soldiers before they encountered any resistance. That came in the form of Captain\_Haiku, sub-commander of the Red Wing.



## CHAPTER 36

### RELEASE

**“Well, I guess** you can go,” said Sir\_Zel\_Remus to Ava, Cyrus and Everett, “I won’t hold you up any longer.” The foot soldiers had returned their items under order from their commander.

“Thank you,” said Ava strapping on her sword holster. “What about Vanja and Wang,” she asked, “Will they be set free too?”

“I’m afraid that’s a no-can-do. They’re wanted by the Dark Flame, and I’ll have to take them to the High Command, Lord\_Erebus. I still have to follow the game objectives,” Remus sighed, “I know how the Hive systems work. It would mess up a few things if I let them go.”

“Anyway, none of you should worry about that.” Remus smiled as the trio prepared to leave, “Good luck, and be careful out there,” he said shaking each of their hands in turn as they left. An armed escort accompanied them to the edge of the encampment where they were directed to the main road.

When they were alone, Cyrus turned to the others, whispering sharply, “We can’t leave Vanja and Wang, they’ve bailed us out twice now! We’ve got to try rescue them.”

Everett snapped back, “Look, we’re free because of the kindness of a friend of mine. I’ve known Remmy for years. He’s not someone I just met yesterday. I’m not going to do the bogue on him after he’s done us a favour.”

“You call ‘not killing us,’ a favour?” said Cyrus as they walked away from the village, “It doesn’t feel right, just to leave them.”

“Vanja and Wang are Meta, and they can handle themselves,” replied Everett sharply.

"I agree with Cyrus," Ava chimed in, "I fought beside Wang and Vanja in Tolwich, it's our duty to rescue them. They would do the same for us."

"That's not the point. We need to book it out of here while we still can. And I know you're an equal for the Meta, Ava, but neither of you are good at stealth. We can't hope to face that many Crusaders in a frontal assault, there must be hundreds. Do either of you have a plan?"

"You're quite good at stealth," said Cyrus, "That's what you do, isn't it?"

"This is your idea!" began Everett raising his voice, "Why should I risk my neck for a plan I don't believe in?"

"We can't just do nothing."

"Why not? It's what we usually do."

Ava let out a startled yelp as she ducked under an arrow that whizzed past her head. It was a well-placed shot that would have had unpleasant consequences if not for her inhuman reflexes. All three drew swords and took up defensive positions whilst squinting into the dark of the forest ahead.

"Can you see anything?" asked Everett.

"Nothing. I can't see in the dark. But I can hear them moving," whispered Ava, another arrow zinged past as she managed to slip behind a tree in time.

"We're sitting ducks. What can we do?" whispered Cyrus harshly as he claimed his own tree as cover.

"I can give us some light," said Ava as she pointed her blade towards the treetops quietly reciting under her breath, "*Vas Flam Hur.*" A white flame shot out from her sword tip extending to the treetops, setting them alight and instantly illuminating the area. An archer sitting amidst the branches was caught in the blaze and fell out of the trees to land with an unpleasant thump.

“It’s a wood elf,” said Cyrus confused, “What’s an elf doing this far south?”

The sounds of battle rang through the forest indicating a disturbance back at the village.

“There’s some sort of scuffle back there,” said Ava, “If the village is under attack, then everyone’s distracted. We could try to free Vanja and Wang.”

“Let’s go!” said Cyrus running back towards Woodsville with Ava close behind him.

With a heavy sigh, Everett ran after them.



## CHAPTER 37

### A PROPOSITION

**“Now. Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang and Vanja,”** greeted Sir\_Zel\_Remus as he entered the makeshift command quarters, “You know I always thought your name was very witty, I’m sure we’d be allies under different circumstances,” he said with a glance at Wang as he rifled quickly through their possessions quickly finding what he was after, “A fully translated copy of the Tome of Leto. Excellent. Thank you for bringing it to me.”

He turned to his captives whilst thumbing his way through the pages, “Is this the only copy?”

“It’s not the sort of thing you share with friends and family, is it?” replied Wang, “Is that all you’re after?”

“Yes,” said Remus, tucking the book away in a side pouch, “That is all *I’m* after, and I would let you go if it were up to me. But there are orders to take you to Lord\_Erebus. He wants to make an example of you, apparently.”

“Can we persuade you otherwise?” asked Vanja.

“Oh? What did you have in mind?” posed Remus curiously.

“Gold. We can give you a hundred thousand.”

“Tempting... but can you make it more tempting?” Remus queried with a raised eyebrow.

Vanja exchanged a look with Wang, “That’s all we have to offer...” she said with her eyes down.

“That’s very kind of you, but it’s become rather worth my while to hand you in, even if you offered twice that,” began Remus, “I’m looking at a monetary reward and a ranking adjustment, and you

know what that does for sponsorships. I could crack the top thirty or twenty.”

The top twenty players all made very good livings from the game. Breaking into those elite ranks on Brith was regarded as the very pinnacle of virtual achievement. Those chosen few were perceived as amongst the most glamorous and greatest influencers in all of cyberspace. Sponsors bombarded them and, with few exceptions, they made more from deals than they did from playing the actual game.

The wealthiest Meta player was Adesina\_Nilsen. At rank eleven, they were an elemental blade master of some renown. What made them such an intriguing figure, was their mass appeal to diverse markets both in and out of game. In reality, Adesina was a Nigerian-Norwegian, non-binary trans individual with unique sculpted features. These same traits were reflected in their Brith avatar who represented over a hundred brands with every appearance, and was the closest thing to a supermodel of the cyberage. When interviewed, Adesina was asked, “What is it that makes you so engaging with your audience? Is it your male or female appeal, your African or European appeal, your real-life or cyber appeal?” Adesina simply replied, “Yes.”

“However,” Remus said with a sudden shift in tone, “there is maybe another option open to you. One you probably never considered. You could cut ties with your current allegiances. What’s the Golden Order done of note recently? And the Riders of Crad, they’re not especially relevant in Orsus these days, are they?”

“Are you asking us to join the Dark Flame?” asked Wang, “You’re the bad guys in all of this.”

“Really? Bad guys? No one’s really bad here. We’re all just playing to win. Just, don’t take it all so seriously.”

In simpler times, many used games to act contrary to their true nature, even playing the role of a bad guy on occasion just for entertainment value. This was still the case in certain smaller scale



environments, which led to a narrative resolution within days or weeks. This approach in open ended games like *Neverborn* always met with failure. It proved impossible to sustain over a prolonged period in such an all-consuming environment. Not only would Brith's karmic system catch up to people, but the realism of the game triggered guilt and associated feelings that weighed heavily on the conscience.

It was difficult for Wang to digest, he'd dedicated much of his adult life to being "mostly good" in Brith, it was a complex and emotionally challenging transition in mindset. *Neverborn* was more than a game, it was a lifestyle choice he'd embraced in a way that aligned with his personal sensibilities. He glanced over at Vanja who remained expressionless.

"Look," said Remus with a sigh, "I know it's not for everyone. I didn't think it was for me at first either. But in the Meta, you've got to treat the game as a job. We do our best and we do what we have to do, but at the end of the day it's our livelihoods. We all do things in our careers, which we don't want to just to get ahead. At least this is all make believe. No one really gets hurt. People used to do far worse to each other all the time to get ahead in my old job."

"Well, they didn't go around killing innocent people, did they?" postulated Wang.

"No, they did worse, because it had real consequences in the real world. I'm not the sort of person who wants someone else to lose their income stream, but I have a job to do too. If you work with me, we can keep the gravy train going for everyone."

A horn sounded from outside, which put Remus' teeth on edge, "God, I hate that sound," he muttered under his breath, "Don't go anywhere, will you? We have more to discuss. Even if one of you joined, it could save the other. And you know, someone who goes about decapitating people and carving giant cocks on them may be better suited to the Dark Flame," Remus said with a signal to the guards to stay put before leaving.

Remus ran across to the far side of the village towards the commotion. It was a chaotic scene, which is precisely not how he liked things. A black clad figure with arrows protruding from his armour at all angles emerged from the darkness holding a sword in one hand and a horn in the other.

“You look like you’ve been in a fight with a porcupine,” observed the commander.

“Elves are everywhere, arrows fly from the darkness, take cover, Remus,” huffed Captain\_Haiku as he staggered towards him.

“Elves? In Orsus?” asked Remus.

An arrow trailing lightning slammed into Haiku’s back. He dropped awkwardly to his knees, blood pouring from his mouth, “I die in battle, you must avenge me brother, farewell Remus.”

“A bit dramatic, Haiku. Your last line didn’t even conform to structure,” said the commander as he drew his sword.

“Eeeeeearghhhh!” moaned the captain as he slumped over. It wasn’t so much a death rattle as a last effort to fill the missing syllable in his verse.

What seemed like two more bolts of lightning were launched at Remus. Both missiles were slapped away by quick movements of his blade.

Black clad corpses littered the area, all had elven arrows protruding from them. A fresh squad of footmen arrived awaiting instructions. In addition to being a Meta level combatant, Remus was a master tactician. Elves were painful to deal with and their hit and run tactics made perfect use of this sort of terrain. He had to even the odds quickly. fire would flush out the elves and destroy their night vision advantage as it spread.

“Oil and fire,” he commanded, “Torch the trees!”



## CHAPTER 38

### KARN

**Ava gasped in** pain as an arrow thumped into her leg, penetrating her armour and forcing her to the ground. Everett and Cyrus both rushed to her side.

“Are you okay?” asked Everett, helping her up. Ava managed a nod as she got to her feet. Pain was a design flaw, which would give her a clear disadvantage in combat. Pain in cyberspace could be tuned to the desired levels with both in-game and Virtech® controls, Ava didn’t have that option.

“You’re the one... who slaughtered the prince’s entourage,” said Paquin\_Karn as he emerged from smoke and darkness looking like a pointy eared angel of vengeance, “Let this be a lesson to you. Every action demands a swift reaction.”

“And you two,” he said readying an arrow, “are marked for death too. Who’s first?”

“Wait,” said Cyrus desperately, “What’s he talking about, Ava?”

“It was what they deserved,” she breathed.

“You destroyed what’s been one of the most profitable ventures to come from the woodlands,” returned the elf, raising his bow.

“You killed them all?” questioned Cyrus with surprise. It was the first sign he’d seen that Ava didn’t quite think along human lines, “I thought you just got my purse back?”

Ava remained silent and Cyrus exchanged a panicked glance with Everett.

“We can give you gold!” blurted Cyrus frantically, “That’s what you’re after isn’t it?”

“How much?” said the elf cocking his head to the side as he pointed an arrow at Cyrus.

“I have access to millions in Skara Brae,” interrupted Ava much to the surprise of Cyrus and Everett.

“Millions? Ha! Why should I believe that?” Paquin said with a dismissive tone, although he was obviously keen to hear more.

Ava pulled out the arrow with a small yelp, “Only Lord\_Scottish and I had access to the Skara Brae vaults. He had put millions into the game.”

Paquin lowered his weapon. The elf was clearly intrigued. He licked his lips to prepare a response when movement behind drew his attention.

“Is this where the party is?” came a voice from the darkness. Paquin turned to see a large group of neo-cyberpunks wander in. They casually strolled around him much to his confusion and annoyance. Paying little heed to the elf, they congregated in groups of two or three idly chatting or practicing a few dance moves.

“Can’t you see we’re busy here?” Paquin fumed.

“Hey, cool it,” said one running a zip motion across the mouth.

“Yeah, don’t get your arrows in a twist, pal,” said another.

“We’re in the middle of a battle here! Get out of the way or suffer the consequences.”

The cyberpunks completely failed to look frightened or intimidated by Paquin’s threat. Instead, they continued their private conversations.

“I’m a top fifty Meta, now get out of the way,” shouted Paquin. It was then he realised his quarry had disappeared. He looked around wildly, but couldn’t see past the black leather clad figures surrounding him.

“This is your last warning. Get out of the way, you damn noobs!” he yelled at a girl wearing a gas mask with dreadlocks, “Did you think

cyberspace would smell really bad? Maybe it's so you don't have to contend with the smell of your bad hair care regimen?" He was met with indifference, which prompted an elven battle cry and arrows fired in a circular arc around him. Several cyberpunks fell, and the others quickly surrounded him, taking up arms.

"There's always one who's trying to ruin everyone else's fun isn't there," the gas-masked girl yelled, throwing an axe at him.

Paquin expertly somersaulted into the trees above as a barrage of energy spells, knives and other missiles came his way. With a whistle, five more elves emerged from the darkness firing arrows into the group of cyberpunks. Paquin made good his escape whilst the cyberpunks were occupied, running between tree branches as he tried to relocate his prey. Millions of BGP was a lot of money, even for the top Meta and one way or another the opportunity wouldn't allude him.



## CHAPTER 39

### RESCUE

**The Dimension Gate** opened near the command building. A large contingent of knights in gleaming armour under the command of Aymere emerged. They spread out efficiently and were instantly engaged by a small number of crusaders.

“Search the surrounding buildings,” shouted Aymere.

In a matter of moments, Vanja and Wang had been located, liberated, and their guards put out of commission. They hurriedly grabbed their belongings and were escorted directly before Aymere.

“We meet again,” said Aymere in his usual smarmy yet charming manner.

“Good evening, good sir. It is good fortune that you arrived when you did,” remarked Wang, “we were given a choice between certain death and joining the Dark Flame. It was a difficult decision.”

“Where are the others?” asked Aymere looking around, “Weren’t they with you?”

“I’m afraid we got separated from the others,” said Wang, strapping on his equipment.

Vanja gave a quick nod to Aymere as she readied her bow, “The rest were held in that building,” she said, but seeing Aymere’s men emerge from it empty handed added, “If they’re not there now, they may have escaped on their own, or were moved elsewhere.”

“What the blazes is going on here?” observed Aymere as he surveyed the scene.

It was a peculiar sight. Much of the surrounding forest was now alight and there were a number of skirmishes taking place. Neo-



cyberpunks fought elves, elves fought crusaders, crusaders fought cyberpunks and Aymere's own men seemed to be fighting everyone. There was no sense of coordination between sides, it was a complete free for all.

"We have a Dimension Gate open," he continued, "Let's start falling back."

"Thank you, but no. I simply won't get into one of those portals. You've been very helpful already, but I'm sure Vanja and I can fight our way out of this," said Wang visibly shaken at the very mention of the gateway.

"You want to stay here, amongst all this?" asked Aymere with raised eyebrows.

"There's no way we'll persuade him to go through a Dimension Gate. Believe me, I've tried many times," said Vanja with the tone of someone who had long suffered a petulant child.

"Very well," said Aymere looking around slightly perplexed, "We will remain until you're clear of the battle."

"There's also another complication. A chap named Remus is here, do you know him? He's got our copy of the Tome of Leto," mentioned Wang.

"Remus!" said Aymere, "Yes, I know him well, from before he joined the Dark Flame. He was always a formidable Meta. I'd heard he'd gotten involved with the crusaders. This could be problematic."

Aymere seemed momentarily unsure of himself as he considered the situation, "We need to get it back, or we're in a race against the Dark Flame to find the *Neverborn*."

"You always were, weren't you?" asked Wang.

"But we had a big advantage. That's gone if they have your copy of the Tome. The threat is now very real," said Aymere gravely.

"Well, as real as it gets in this place," mumbled Wang as he ushered Vanja through the forest.

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“How’s your leg,” asked Everett with concern. The three had found shelter amongst a large rock formation about a hundred metres away from the village. Cyrus peered out from behind the edge of a large stone as the battle raged on in Woodsville. Much of the forest surrounds had caught fire.

“It’s feeling a lot better,” replied Ava. She’d removed her leg plate and bandaged underneath with ripped cloth from her outer robe. Everett watched as she did so, marvelling at the realism of the bleeding, but then, noticing the fine form of her leg, he quickly turned away.

A team of twenty coders had worked with surgeons for over five years to mimic realistic injuries. In the early days of *Neverborn*, wounds were exaggerated like a bad slasher film. They’d optimised over time to reach a level of realism rivalled only by virtual medical training environments. When the latest update was demonstrated to the consulting doctors, it was the general consensus that the results were “bloody amazing.”

“The whole area’s ablaze,” whispered Cyrus, “It looks like there’s Seraphim there, too. I’m going to go in for a closer look. Back in a minute.”

Everett gave Ava a smile and sat beside her as she hurriedly strapped on her leg plate, “You should sit out of the battle. Cyrus and I can muddle our way through this.”

“It’s still my duty to protect you,” Ava smiled, “and I don’t think you’d get very far with your muddling.” She did up the final buckle and turned to Everett, “You have many fine qualities that many Metas don’t. But it will take more than kindness and compassion to stop that elf. Leave him to me.”

“You’re very kind yourself,” Everett said, nervously preparing to say words that he feared may be better left unspoken, “If we don’t make it out of here, I just wanted you to know that you’re more real to me than most real girls. I’d probably embarrass both of us completely and try ask you out if I met you... under different circumstances.”

Ava giggled and shot a smile at Everett, but seeing he wasn’t joking she regarded him curiously, “You’re attracted to me? Even knowing I’m not human?”

“Well...” began Everett trying not to trip over his tongue as he searched for words, “I guess our reality is just made up of what we sense, feel and think. I can sense you with all my faculties, and I know how I feel and think about you. None of it seems different from reality. You’re as real to me as anyone else... smarter, funnier, and more beautiful too.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m not biological? That I can’t live in your reality?”

“Why would it?” returned Everett sincerely.

Ava frowned, unsure how to respond. Finally, she turned to him wearing an odd expression, “I need to think about this.” The words caused an unpleasant feeling to take hold in Everett’s gut, but he didn’t have time to respond as Cyrus returned.

“Alymere’s here. Wang and Vanja are with him. We’ve got to get over to them.”

The sound of approaching footsteps put them all on guard. In an instant, weapons were drawn as a slight figure emerged from the darkness.

“Kyra,” whispered Ava, “What are you doing here?”

“I saw the fires,” Kyra responded with a childlike innocence, “Is this your doing?”

“This is very dangerous. You shouldn’t be here, Kyra,” said Ava, “we’re all in danger.”

Ava turned to the others, "If you re-join Vanja and Wang, I'll get Kyra to safety. I'll meet you back here." Cyrus and Everett nodded and started towards the village. They hadn't gone five metres when they were halted in their tracks.

"Not so fast," said Paquin\_Karn as he alighted from a tree, landing with an uncanny dexterity in front of them, "I believe we were in the middle of discussions."



## CHAPTER 40

### DUEL OF SHADOWS

**“There are two** of you?” observed Paquin as he appraised Kyra, “I hope you’ve both brought your wallets. I want two million, or none of you leave here alive.”

Ava quickly moved to cover Kyra; sword held in both hands. Everett and Cyrus backed away. They were lemmings caught between colliding freight trains.

“What are we supposed to do?” whispered Cyrus harshly, “We can’t fight him.”

Everett stepped up, clearing his throat, “That’s a lot of money,” he said loudly, “Surely a million is fine.”

Paquin kept his eyes on Ava but tilted his head to address Everett.

“You’re expecting me to haggle?” said the elf flatly, “You think your lives are worth less than two million?”

“Well, I’m unemployed and I spend my whole day playing virtual games,” began Everett, “there’s no way my life is worth... well anything now that I think about it.”

“I agree,” said Paquin firing off a shot, which struck Everett’s leg. Everett immediately fell to the ground.

“Ow! My leg!” he moaned.

Paquin followed up with another arrow.

“Ow! My other leg!”

Cyrus rushed out to Everett’s side and began dragging him to cover.

“Good negotiating,” he said.

Paquin ignored the two as he nocked again. His eyes remained fixed on Ava and Kyra, "You're not Metas. What are you?"

"It doesn't matter. Let the other's go and we can discuss your money," replied Ava.

"Your allies are your weakness. The ease of killing them ensures your cooperation. No, I think I'll keep them right here," said Paquin fervently.

The elf's eyes abruptly turned a shade of red and Everett shrank away, glancing at Ava in alarm. Paquin was whipping himself into the *Kai Shael*.

"Why are his eyes turning red?" whispered Cyrus.

"It's the Kai Shael. I think it directly translates as *blood rage*," returned Everett.

The elves of Brith had little regard for its other inhabitants. They were so certain of their own superiority, that they could move into a frenzied state when faced with anyone they regarded as lesser beings, and that was just about everyone. It was effectively an innate form of hate, which increased their strength, speed and combat abilities for a short period. A single elven archer undergoing the *Kai Shael* had been able to slaughter an entire unit of goblins at the Battle of Mongog.

"It will take time to get your gold," said Ava, trying to avoid a fight, "You have my word."

"Not good enough. Dimension Gate there and be back here within the hour or your friends die... beginning with..." the elf flicked his red eyes towards Everett, then Cyrus before they came to rest on Kyra, "... beginning with her."

Kyra responded before Ava could intervene, "You won't find me such an easy target," she yelled defiantly. With a swift movement, Kyra removed a small blade from her belt, and launched it at Paquin who easily slipped out of the way. It was a bold but naive move. She was no match for the Meta.

“Foolish,” said Paquin quietly as his eyes changed from a dull burgundy to a vibrant glowing crimson. In an instant he launched a volley of arrows at blinding speed. Ava stepped in front of Kyra parrying three of the missiles, but two more penetrated her sword arm and shoulder armour. She dropped her blade with a muffled cry.

“The time for deals is over,” the elf whispered harshly keeping his gaze on Ava as he raised his bow for the kill, “Better luck in your next life.”

Cyrus drew his blade and ran towards Ava. It was a useless gesture; he was too far away to make a difference. Paquin fired. The arrow travelled true towards Ava but was deflected at the last moment by a spinning projectile, which caught it in mid-flight.

Looking around wild eyed, the elf’s gaze came to rest on a patch of darkness that was somehow darker than the rest of the woods. Even his elven sight couldn’t penetrate it.

“Show yourself,” commanded Paquin narrowing his eyes to red slits.

Black smoke formed into the shape of a female figure dressed in black leather armour. A mask covered their nose and mouth. They stood battle ready, armed to the teeth with swords, knives, chains and various throwing blades.

“These two are under my protection.” The words were a whisper but drifted clearly through the night air.

“Suzuka, stay out of this. This is elven business,” snarled the elf, immediately recognising his new adversary.

“This is *my* business. It’s been made worth my while,” replied Suzuka.

“You’re a business woman,” began the elf, “Surely we can find a more profitable deal?”

“No deal. Walk away.”

“Still working for others, Suzuka? How are you top of the Meta when you don’t even play your own game?”



With a snarl, Paquin opened fire on the assassin. Even with the added speed of the *Kai Shael*, the arrows hit nothing as Suzuka vanished into darkness. The elf scanned the forest trying to reacquire his target. In an instant the entire area was covered in pitch black. The sort that not even his infrared could penetrate.

“You thought the night would give you an advantage,” came a disembodied voice, “but you’ve never known true darkness.”

Paquin leaped into the air, dextrously grabbing a branch to pull himself out of the unnatural shadows, “You underestimate me, Suzuka,” he said dismissively as he pulled a seeker arrow from his quiver. Shooting it into the air, Paquin watched with amusement as it changed direction to track its concealed target. He immediately followed up with a bombardment of arrows in the direction the seeker’s flight path indicated.

“It’s over, Suzuka. I have the high ground!” Paquin yelled as his seeker altered course again and again to reach its target.

A shuriken came in reply through the darkness. The projectile cut short the seeker arrow’s flight and it fell to the ground in pieces. An onslaught of spinning blades seemed to appear from nowhere, flying towards Paquin from all directions. They exploded on impact with the tree as the elf dodged, side stepped and leapt to avoid them. As Paquin leapt from a tree, a chain flew from the shadows wrapping around his ankle and pulling him to the darkness below.

Everett and Cyrus could feel movement all around them, but not a sound was made. Within moments, the shadows came apart like tendrils of smoke. Paquin\_Karn lay unmoving on the grass. There was no sign of the assassin.

“Efficient,” said Cyrus glancing at the body as he assisted Everett towards Ava.

“Are you OK?” Everett said helping her stand straight. She nodded with a smile and proceeded to remove the arrows from her armour. To Everett’s surprise his own wounds had already closed, healing

perfectly, “Well... I guess I wasn’t as badly wounded as I thought,” he said in confusion.

Ava pointed to the ankh around his neck, which was glowing with a gentle blue hue. Everett removed it, staring at it with wonder.

“It has regenerative powers,” said Ava.

Placing it around Ava’s neck, Everett watched it blaze a bright blue as her wounds closed over leaving nothing but flawless skin, “Thank you,” Ava said returning it to Everett, “But Lord\_Scottish wanted you to have it. It has limits, so use it wisely.”

Moving her arm and shoulder to loosen them, Ava turned to Kyra.

“Kyra, what is your connection with Suzuka? It’s time we had a proper talk.”



# CHAPTER 41

## REUNION

**Back at the** village, the battle continued with all the tactical acuity of a barroom brawl. The body count was now in the hundreds. Dead elves, neo-cyberpunk, Seraphim and Crusaders lay scattered around the village and the surrounds. The cyberpunks, who were not especially combat ready, had received the worst of it. The five survivors were led by number 2,678 ranked Meta-warlock, Q\_Tranq. In addition to the cyberpunks, Q now commanded a small unit of Elves and Crusaders that he had beguiled with mind-twisting magic. The combination of melee and ranged weaponry, mixed with Q's offensive spells made for a very effective unit and they were proving challenging for the others.

The remaining Crusaders had rallied under the three surviving sub commanders. One of these units fought a long, hard battle against the last of the Seraphim knights who remained in tight formation as they escorted Vanja and Wang to the main road.

It was some distance away from the battle that two long-time rivals met for the first time in several years.

"Alymere, it's good to see you, old friend," said Remus with a smile, "It's been years since we last spoke."

"Not since the Royal Guard. You didn't strike me as the sort who'd join the Crusaders," noted Alymere.

"It's all about the numbers. The Dark Flame are statistically more likely to win. I've seen the resources they have, and I'm afraid you're outgunned. It's simply a more reliable way to make a living," said Remus scratching his beard.

“I don’t buy it,” said Alymere shaking his head. You always saw this as more than just a game,” began Alymere, “You always talked about the consequences of moral and immoral actions in VR. Superior numbers wouldn’t scare you into joining the enemy. There’s more to it.”

“I quit my job. I had to make sure my income stream was as secure as possible...”

“Try again. What does Eleanor think of you joining the Dark Flame?”

“Eleanor?” murmured Remus quietly.

“Yes, Eleanor. You remember, that girl you proposed to? You were going to have a cyberceremony... I never did receive an invitation,” countered the count.

“Eleanor... I haven’t spoken to her in some time,” Remus said suddenly turning pale, “Have you seen her?”

“No...” said the Count reflectively, “... But I heard she’s no longer in Orsus. That she travelled to Chessex. What happened between you two?”

“It didn’t work out,” said Remus with a touch of melancholy and he lowered his guard for a second.

“So, she left and you joined the Dark Flame? That makes more sense. I don’t think she’d approve of this.”

Remus turned away, “What she thinks doesn’t matter anymore. What’s done is done.”

“So? A girl leaves you and you abandon your virtual morals?” questioned Alymere.

“It’s not that simple. There’s more going on here than you realise. I’m fulfilling a key role in the Brith narrative. If it wasn’t me, it’d be someone like Maynard. You know the sort of fanaticism he’d bring. I’m at least bringing a more moderate attitude to the role.”

Alymere pondered his previous dealings with Maynard, the number seventeen ranked Meta.

“So, are we going to do this?” he asked, holding up his sword, “You know I’m still ranked above you.”

“Barely,” replied Remus lifting his own blade. They gave each other a quick salute before stalking one another. Alymere circled left and right, throwing an occasional feint, and Remus echoed his movements. The heavy armour added rigidity to their movement, but opponents of this calibre didn’t lack speed. A sidestep and lunge from Alymere exposed a possible weakness in his opponent’s footwork but before he could put it to the test, a rumble in the distance caught his attention.

“What’s that sound?” asked Alymere frowning.

The sound, like rolling thunder, gradually rose and they could now make out hoof beats, “Do you have reinforcements on the way?”

Remus appeared confused, “I was going to ask you the same thing.”



## CHAPTER 42

### THUNDERHOOF

**Wang and Vanja** escaped south of the main road as a centuria of centaurs came thundering through.

The Protectors of the Forest didn't much care for the goings on outside the woods, and even scuffles between outsiders within their territory didn't motivate them to act. However, when the forest or its wildlife was threatened, they were quick to mobilise. They were environmental activists on steroids. And the forest was on fire.

Their captain, Heironymus\_Thunderhoof, stood nine feet tall and wore brass armour in Romanesque style. He bore a shield in one arm and a massive six-foot sword in the other. Despite his intimidating appearance, he was quite gentle when not in a battle rage, and a skilled craftsman who made wooden carvings of animals for the children of Woodsville. Heironymus was thinking a lot about carving as his legions descended upon Woodsville at breakneck speed, but not wooden animals.

"Would you look at that?" whistled Wang. The remaining footmen on all sides were now in a pitched melee with the centaurs, "Do you think we should help?"

"Alymere can look after himself. Besides, Remus has our book, we need to find *Cold Burn* before he does. It's the closest artifact so he'll probably head there first," said Vanja in her unemotional manner.

"What about the others?" asked Wang.

"We have to assume they made it out on their own. They weren't where we thought they were. They could be anywhere."

"Oh... well that makes me a bit sad," said Wang, "I really quite liked them. Maybe Cyrus was a little highly strung, but Everett and Ava



were both quite fun in their own way.”

“We’ll see them again, I’m sure. But for now, we keep moving east. We can be out of the valley by dawn.”

“Fine, but I’m so hungry I could eat a cow... one of those really muscly Belgian ones... you know what I’m talking about.”

Vanja wrinkled her nose with the usual disgust.

“Well fine. Forget the cow but there’s a Gourmax just a few miles away.”

Gourmax were the world’s leading producer of lab grown beef patties. In 2033 lab grown products became cheaper and easier to mass produce than their farm bred equivalents. Another decade saw lab grown products surpass organic sales. The world had embraced a vegan ideal in which no animals were harmed for food production. However, this led to two splinter groups. Firstly, a purer breed of vegan, who refused to eat anything that had a legacy of animal harm; including cultured proteins despite their nutritional benefits. This was no great surprise as there were many who simply never liked the taste of meat. A second group, known as labarians, would eat exclusively lab grown products as the consumption of vegetables was still perceived as eating naturally occurring living organisms. Ironically, the labarians would claim a sense of moral superiority, aggressively condemning all other groups, but vegans in particular for their continued consumption of vegetables. Many meat lovers, who’d previously been verbally assaulted by vegan principles, embraced labarianism simply as an opportunity for moral pay back.

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Kyra, Ava, Everett and Cyrus had steadily moved to the northwest to distance themselves from the battle.

“Are there centaurs charging through Woodsville, or am I hallucinating?” asked Cyrus.

Everett squinted carefully trying to make sense of the moving shapes. He recognised a number of silhouetted centaur-like figures against the flames and alongside the muffled cries and metal clanging on metal, he became momentarily mesmerised.

“No,” murmured Everett, “They’re there. Either that or I’m having the same hallucination as you.”

Cyberhallucinations were most commonly caused by the misalignment of broadcast plates within the Virtech® helm. Roughly one in a thousand had experienced them at some point and the phenomena was quite similar to consuming LSD with random dream-like sequences and compromised visual perception. The rarest and most intense cyberhallucinations were caused by the accidental stimulation of a certain section of the prefrontal lobe. This caused religious-based hallucinations involving an all-powerful presence. Interestingly enough, it was found that Edmund Blessed, the founder of Virtualism’s helm had been misaligned in a way that caused seizures in that region of the brain whenever he connected. You could say he was in a state of fluctuating divine bliss, a disorder that was referred to as Acute Religious Synaptic Epilepsy. The misalignment in his Virtech® unit was discovered soon after his death by a coroner. In his report the coroner called the fault, “An extremely rare error, which left the wearer with a sense of peace, wholeness and that an intensely powerful presence was watching over them. Having worn the helm myself, I can say that Blessed was receiving revelations from somewhere, but I doubt they were divine in nature. The source was more likely his A.R.S.E.”

“So, you don’t know why Suzuka is protecting you?” repeated Ava as they continued on their journey. They were now nearly a kilometre from Woodsville.

“I don’t know her,” replied Kyra. She had been unable to provide any useful information about the assassin.

“Well, the other part of your story is an interesting revelation,” said Everett looking at Kyra, “That’s not what I expected.”

“What bit?” queried Kyra.

“The part about Iorwerth Prosser. About him being your master?” Cyrus said it as though he’d stumbled upon some sort of revelation, although he had no idea what it meant.

“I was his slave. He kept me locked away from the world. His death was a welcome thing,” said Kyra with a voice full of resentment. She was clearly upset recalling her past, and Ava put her arm around her, which seemed to offer some comfort. The two appeared more than just identical twins.

“Two people who commissioned custom AI’s both murdered... what does that mean?” pondered Cyrus.

“It means we’re onto something,” said Ava, “A possible reason Lord\_Scottish was killed... and Prosser. What of the third death, this Edmund Blessed? Did he also commission custom COGs?”

“I don’t know,” replied Everett. But it’s a good possibility. He ran a large organisation and a religion at that. He was rich enough.”

“And the Polymath too,” began Cyrus, “he was built from the same matrix. I wonder who commissioned him?”

“Marcus Solomon. He was killed this morning,” came a deep voice from the depths of the forest, “In exactly the same circumstances as the others. With you both present in town when it happened, I might add.” A tall man wearing long robes with a flat brimmed hat emerged from the darkness. He inhaled deeply from his pipe whilst scrutinising the group. It was the Druid, Sol.

“Oh god, it’s Mr. Stink Cloud,” said Everett.

“So, is it coincidence that you were there again when a prominent figure was murdered in Cyberspace, Mr. Everett? I think not.”

“I’m innocent! I couldn’t have done it. I don’t even know how it could have been done,” began Everett defensively.

"It's true," added Ava, "Everett did not have the opportunity or knowledge to commit these crimes."

"Nevertheless, you've been present at four murders, that makes you a person of interest, wouldn't you say?"

Everett could only make stuttering starts but nothing articulate passed his lips.

"I'll get to you Mr. Everett, but there are a few other leads to pursue," he said looking to Ava and Kyra, "You two... do you have any memory of your origin?"

"My memories begin in Iorwerth's manor," said Kyra.

"I have no recollection of life before Skara Brae," added Ava, "Who are you?"

"Detective Booth," replied the Druid with a tip of his hat, "Hello, Cyrus."

"Detective?" asked Everett turning to Cyrus, "You know this guy?"

"He's been investigating the deaths," replied Cyrus without removing his gaze from the Druid, "Apparently he's been investigating us for some time."

"You've both been on my radar for a while now. A fourth death, and you were in the vicinity again Mr. Everett. There's a pattern forming."

"What are you implying?" said Everett.

"I'm implying you're implicated. There's more going on here than is evident right now, but it's obvious to me that you're at the centre of it all," replied the Druid in a slow drawl that maximised the impact of his words.

"How can I be at the centre of it? There can't be evidence suggesting I did it because I don't even understand what's happening."

"And yet each death is recorded against your karmic flag. You can add Marcus to that list, now." The detective relit his pipe as Everett stopped and stuttered about.

“I don’t even know who Marcus is! This is Arctik!” said Everett, exasperated. “I’m being framed like Oswald!”

In 2063, a hundred years after actual events, an investigation began into the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The fateful events of the 22nd of November, 1963, were re-enacted, driven by a QUISC AI. The simulation proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Oswald could not have acted alone. Two other key locations were identified by the AI as bullet origin points required to faithfully reconstruct the assassination. When faced with the weight of evidence, a government official by the name of Frederick Goreman made a public statement maintaining the official version of events. As QUISC engineers and prosecutors mounted an offence on the government narrative, the rising pressure forced Frederick’s resignation. Secret service colleagues would say, “Fred took a bullet to protect national security. It’s not like it’s the first time.” The truth on the matter remains unknown.

Booth considered the possibility. He didn’t have much faith in the idea, but he never dismissed a possibility at this point in the investigation.

“So, how’d you do it? Are you working alone? Is there anyone else I should be talking to?” queried the Druid.

“I must have been herded to each location. It’s possible using the Hive systems, I swear this is Arctik,” replied Everett looking around desperately.

“The Hive systems?” continued Booth.

Everett frowned for a moment before finally answering, “Talk to Remmy McGee maybe? Remus... he can explain the Hive systems to you!”

“And where can I find this... Remmy?” said the detective scrawling notes in his pad.

“He was just back at Woodsville,” said Cyrus pointing back to the burning blaze clearly visible through the forest, “It’s a bit of a mess

back there.”

Booth took a long drag on his pipe considering the new information before speaking, “I’ll catch up with all of you before this is over.” He turned to Everett, “Don’t think you’re off the hook, there’s something very odd going on with you, Mr. Everett. Don’t leave Brith... I’ll find you.”

“But I’ve done nothing...” Everett repeated defensively.

“You weren’t at every murder by random chance,” began Booth, “Both of you, tread lightly, I’m watching you.”

The Druid tipped his hat and disappeared into the night.

“So, he’s an actual detective?” asked Everett turning to Cyrus.

“I guess he is... he found me last night at home too,” said Cyrus, trying to hide a healthy amount of anxiety as he spoke.

“Someone’s trying to pin me for murder!” exclaimed Everett, “I’m a nice guy, aren’t I? I haven’t done anything particularly insulting or offensive to anyone.”

“It’s not murder. Its liberation,” said Kyra looking meaningfully at Everett, “Whoever is doing this is a hero. We’re free now.”



## CHAPTER 43

### THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE CENTAUR

**Hieronimus\_Thunderhoof** came hurtling in like a bull in a china shop. Black and silver clad knights were thrown like ragdolls as he barrelled into Woodsville. Alymere was the first to engage as the centaur swung his massive sword with force enough to cut a small tree in two. Alymere deflected and countered with a shield rush, which forced the massive centaur back.

“Why are you attacking us? We’re not the aggressors here,” yelled Alymere loudly enough to be heard above the sounds of battle.

“Thou hast threatened the forest. Thy doom awaits,” said the centaur, in an implausibly deep voice. He spoke the middle tongue, which was assigned to most COGs designated to be over two hundred years old. The old tongue, which was reserved for COGs older than five hundred years was near incomprehensible and the ancient tongue was complete gibberish to most.

Remus jumped in with a skilled series of swings and sword thrusts, wounding Hieronimus on one leg and backing him up further.

“He’s right you know,” said Remus addressing the centaur, “he had nothing to do with the forest fire. But COGs like you are just too stupid to listen.”

“Thee and thine comrades shalt all be cleansed from the forest. Those of thine allegiance, made example of. Thy hubris knows no bounds if thou dost think the forest is thine to do with as thou wouldst please!” pronounced Heironimus, spittle flying from his mouth.

Despite their opposing loyalties, Remus and Alymere fought well together. They had both trained many long years in the Orsian Royal Guard, which had produced many of Brith’s finest warriors, including



number one ranked Meta, Ferbert\_the\_Invincible. Alymere was the better defender, but Remus excelled at creating openings with his tactical sword play. Together they were a match for Hieronymus, who possessed speed and strength beyond what any player could achieve.

“You really should have joined the Seraphim,” observed Alymere as Remus wounded the centaur again with a thrust to the rump, “It’s not too late.”

“It’s not that easy. The situation is a bit more complex than you realise,” said Remus plunging his sword into Hieronymus’ back. It seemed a sure finishing move but it only served to drive the centaur into a frenzy as he flung Remus a good twenty feet away with a kick from his rear legs.

“Blast it,” said Remus slowly getting to his feet, “I’ve never known where the vital organs are on a centaur... they’re always in the wrong place.”

Hieronymus, enraged, rained blows on Alymere’s shield with his massive blade. It was all Alymere could do to cover as one killer blow after another crashed into him. His shield was ripped away leaving him exposed with just his sword to defend.

Alymere intercepted and countered Hieronymus’ next swing, and tore the edge of his blade deep through Hieronymus’ belly. The centaur turned away spasmodically, ripping the weapon from Alymere’s hand.

The centaur began a deep throaty laugh, removing the blade from his gut as he closed in on Alymere who was now without sword and shield. Chambering his giant blade at his side, Thunderhoof prepared to end Alymere’s life when his head was unexpectedly removed from his shoulders. The centaur collapsed as Remus landed in front of the fallen centaur.

Alymere quickly retrieved his weapon and shield. Remus made no move to stop him. They were, after all, both knights bound to the

Brith code of chivalry.

"You owe me your life, Aymere," said Remus, "I'll collect the debt by leaving now, with the Tome of Leto. Honour forbids you stopping me."

"So it does," conceded Aymere quietly as he assessed the state of the battle. The centaurs, elves, cyberpunks and knights had done an exceptionally thorough job of killing one another. There were still a few skirmishes here and there but nothing either Remus or Aymere couldn't handle alone. Seeing the bodies of his own men scattered about the village, Aymere grimaced, "What a mess. This night couldn't get any worse," he muttered.

Lightning streaked across the sky and a heavy rain poured down. The rain at least cooled the heat of battle as Aymere made his way to the Dimension Gate, dragging his feet.

"We'll see each other again soon," said Aymere with a wry smile, "I'm sure it will be a very different outcome to this one."

He took one last look at Remus who had grabbed the nearest horse.

"Goodbye, old friend," waved Remus as he rode into the darkness. Aymere offered him a quick salute and walked through the portal.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** We are excited to see the first major battle in the War for Brith. Awareness of the Battle of Spiritberry Valley, or Woodsville Massacre as it's also now known, is reaching critical mass. cybercasts of battle sequences are being shared across all channels and the involvement of several Metas, including the death of Paquin\_Karn has now caught the attention of Brith's elite. There is a shift in the Brith zeitgeist as the world prepares for war. We are planning a prolonged conflict that will last several years. And remember, when the dust settles, it's not about who was right. It's about who's left.

*Live to play!*



## CHAPTER 44

### VIRTUALISM 2.0

**Amongst the various** Virtualist factions that arose in the wake of Edmund Blessed's death, by far the most popular was led by the apostle Sidonia. She ran much of the day-to-day business administration of the organisation but had now come into her own as a spiritual leader.

Her particular brand of Virtualism had a more complete mythology. She'd even named key reality engineers creating a hierarchy of archangel-like figures who governed the universal systems, each responsible for different tasks. Sidonia had called it, with startling originality, Virtualism 2.0. A lot of the mythology, she claimed, was based on thoughts originally discussed with Edmund himself.

The group was of the belief that Edmund Blessed would return, bypassing reality and being reborn directly into cyberspace. Whilst Blessed advocated an open ended future, the 2.0 variety belief system was more deterministic. Sidonia had managed to rattle off quite a number of prophecies in the space of just a few days, which had been well socialised within the community. One prophecy had come to pass already. The apostle had predicted, "A plague will sweep the lands, spread from a thousand dead hands", which was reasonably interpreted as a foretelling of the zombie riot across Brith.

Several of Sidonia's most trusted devotees were currently on a clandestine pilgrimage to the eastern town of Velmenheim. None knew the exact purpose, but it was rumoured that the site may be the destination of the second coming of Blessed. The prophet would make his return, proving beyond doubt his divine heritage.

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“Why are you helping me? Nothing is straightforward in Brith. Everyone wants something,” proclaimed Kyra with a child-like anger, “People might act friendly, but everything has a transactional price.”

“That’s not true,” replied Cyrus, “There are good people in Brith... well, mostly good. And don’t forget Ava, she risked her life to protect you.”

Kyra looked to Ava, her hand suddenly sought hers. With a firm grip, Ava replied calmly, “You’ve been through a lot. Not everyone is like Prosser. Lord\_Scottish always treated me like his daughter.”

Kyra took a moment to process this as they were leaving Spiritberry Valley. Conversing with her was a strange experience, she was both immensely articulate and naïve at the same time.

“I know the meaning of family,” she finally replied quietly, “But I don’t understand it.”

“Family is about love,” said Everett trying to sound profound, “It’s an emotional connection that people have. A feeling that makes you care for someone else, that makes you want to put their happiness and well-being before your own.”

“Do you love anyone?” Kyra asked unexpectedly.

Everett gave a nervous laugh, “Well I think for love to work properly, it has to go both ways. I loved my parents when they were alive, but I guess I’ve been without love since then. It enriches life, but it’s not entirely necessary. Talk to Cyrus, he was in love with a girl once...”

“Alexa’s not really a great example,” said Cyrus.

“I know it was a disaster,” Everett followed up seeing Cyrus’ doubtful expression, “But she did really fall for you.” Everett was suddenly feeling very sorry for himself.

“Well, meeting someone... that’s down to chance,” Cyrus said, a bit disturbed by the sudden attention everyone was giving him, “It’s not a relationship I’d use to teach someone about love, it was very

flawed. People have preconceived notions in their head about potential partners... it doesn't always mean a real connection."

A study on cyberrelationships conducted by the number one cyberdating destination, Loveland, had reinforced many of Cyrus' existing thoughts on the matter. The study concluded:

"With avatars often embodying physical perfection, cyberrelationships have removed surface attraction from the equation and evened the playing field. You could conclude that cyberdating is less shallow, but it has in fact exposed previously unrecognised forms of superficial behaviour.

Statistically, only one in four relationships are based on actual mutual love, respect and a real connection between partners. Most are driven by ideals and circumstance. Some enjoy superficial fun or interesting experiences together and think it equates to sustainable affection for one another. Of course, the moment those circumstances and experiences change, the imagined affection disappears. Those with predetermined ideas about potential lovers are no better. They wedge their partner into an imagined perfect ideal rather than seeing the objective reality. This also crumbles when their partner starts acting contrary to that ideal. Ultimately, neither type of foundation is conducive to sustainable relationships."

The two psychologists behind the study, Kelly Middleton and Benedict Doyle, received accolades and recognition for their landmark study. that was at the forefront of understanding the human cyberexperience. Peculiarly enough, they would end up together in a real-world relationship. Unfortunately, it would turn out that the attraction was only superficially based on 'the bonding shared experience of the study' proving that even highly rational awareness of flawed relationship development doesn't prevent it from happening. They are no longer together.

"Love sounds very complicated," pondered Kyra.

"There are different types of love," Ava chimed in, "Love between family is much easier and more consistent than romantic love," she

continued, "You and I are family. I'll be there when you need me."

Kyra smiled for the first time since they'd met.

"We should keep moving east through the night," Ava said turning to Cyrus and Everett.

"East... always east... Do you even know where we're going exactly?" asked Everett.

Ava paused to collect her thoughts, but when she replied she answered with confidence, "Yes, Kyra and I have spoken of it..."

"It's a place called Velmenheim," Kyra finished for Ava.

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It was midnight when Vanja and Wang happened upon Eastbourne Junction. The site, apart from being a well-used travel crossroads with no fewer than seven paths intersecting, was also home to Brith's first Gourmax burger sponsored outlet.

Gourmax now had over two hundred outlets across Brith and employed over four thousand cyberworkers. It was the only chain to use real staff and they prided themselves on the human touch to their service. After all, everything else about their products were artificial and automated. Their employees consisted of kids working part-time to supplement their game activities with extra coin and also players from poorer parts of the globe, who would cash in their Brith currency for dollars. It often acted as a primary source of income in countries where UBI was yet to be implemented. Gourmax paid fairly well with minimum wage set at 40BGP per hour. This was a lot of money in some parts of the world and a single full-time worker could feed an entire family in Burundi or the Congo.

This created its own set of problems with workers as young as seven entering cyberspace from developing nations. It proved difficult to spot the underaged appearing as adult avatars. Arctik had legally



absolved itself of responsibility, leaving it with Gourmax to deal with the issue in their own way. Gourmax argued that they were saving many of their foreign workers from poverty. The merits of child workers vs extreme poverty is still debated, but some countries have taken a firm stand, “Gourmax using cyberchild labour is a practice that’s difficult for any French national to digest,” said the French foreign minister when Gourmax opened their first real world restaurant in Paris. Protests accompanied the outlet until Gourmax introduced the Confit de Canard burger, which made things more palatable to French sensibilities.

“I don’t care what you say, I’m starving and I’m going in,” said Wang, “Not only is it virtual, but their actual products are all lab grown, I don’t see how it impinges on your vegan morals in the slightest.”

“You know I don’t like the taste of meat. But fine, they have food I can eat,” replied Vanja with a heavy sigh. There was no arguing with Wang when it came to his stomach.

The outlet was styled like an old pub but with plenty of seating. Arctik wouldn’t allow anything modern to appear in Brith, despite how lucrative some of the sponsorship offers were. The place was bustling, and Wang made his way direct to the counter.

“Welcome to Gourmax. Max the taste, less the gore,” said the counter worker. This was by no means an official Gourmax tag line. Fast food was a repetitively boring job, and the workers had to occupy their minds somehow. This particular young employee had dreams of writing advertising slogans.

“Good evening, good lady. Or is that good morning? Time seems to have gotten away from me,” said Wang in greeting as he approached the counter, “May I please order a Big Max and a Tofu Supreme for my friend. Both with meal deals.”

It was only a minute’s wait before their meals were delivered and they adjourned to a free table in the corner.

A group of robed travellers were seated at a large table nearby. One amongst them took an interest in them as they unwrapped the papyrus from their food.

“Welcome, strangers. May the favour of the engineers be upon you,” said an innocent looking young lady. She was dressed in the same manner as the others, in white robes with silver game icons sewn into the sleeves and emblazoned across the chest.

“Virtualists!” declared Wang, “I knew it. It’s those game pad symbols. I assumed you’d all disbanded when Blessed died.” Suddenly remembering to introduce himself, Wang performed a modest bow, “Sir\_Pendulous\_Wang and Vanja, at your service.”

“Did you know Edmund?” asked the girl to, which both Wang and Vanja nodded, “I am Sidonia, and I lead Virtualism 2.0. For now, at least, until Edmund’s return.”

“You think he’ll come back? Like the resurrection?” Vanja rarely engaged in these sorts of conversations but she was genuinely intrigued. Religion didn’t interest her but matters of mental health did and she was keen to probe how far the fantasy went.

“He never truly left us. He will be back. I can sense his presence... he’s nearby, waiting for the right moment,” replied Sidonia emphatically.

“And what is Virtualism 2.0? How’s it any different to err... the earlier release?” asked Wang trying to be conversational.

“That’s a good question,” replied Sidonia with a smile, “The great game continues, as it has always done. Our worlds continue to be our own. Edmund had many of the right ideas, but he was not blessed with the gift of foresight. I see a part of the big picture; the world is not as random as it appears. We planned to be here but fate has allowed it. Plans and fate don’t always intersect.”

“Ah, so where are you planning to go?” asked Wang politely trying to sound interested.

“We travel to a cyberwedding,” replied Sidonia.

“A wedding? Who’s the lucky bride and groom?” continued Wang, who felt he was on a roll with the small talk.

“We don’t know,” replied Sidonia, “We only know that fate is placing us there to bear witness to events.”

“Interesting,” replied Vanja dryly, “You do sound a bit like Blessed,” she said readying to extract herself from the conversation. Meaningless words designed to sound meaningful were the hallmark of religious speak in her view.

“Perhaps you would like to hear more of our new philosophy at our next gathering?” asked Sidonia.

“Oh, that’s very kind, good lady, but we have plans of our own,” said Wang as he took a healthy bite from his Big Max, “Hopefully our plans intersect with fate as you say,” he finished with a mouthful of food.

“Safe travels then. And perhaps fate conspires to put you in our path again,” said Sidonia as her group made motions to leave.

Vanja and Wang sat in silence, finishing their burgers, fries and Cola®. By the time they’d finished, the Virtualists had left with a friendly wave on their way out.

“We don’t have any plans of attending a wedding, do we?” asked Wang when they were alone.

“Don’t give it more thought than it’s worth,” said Vanja, “She’s talking rubbish. Prophetic visions are not what they seem. Even QUISC simulations can’t accurately predict the future.”

“In reality, maybe, but Brith is different. You remember what Ava said... there aren’t so many variables to contend with here,” murmured Wang in deep thought, “I hope it’s not my wedding. I’m not ready to settle down yet. Could you imagine that... having your own surprise wedding sprung on you.”

Vanja sighed, rolling her eyes at Wang’s absurd ruminations.

“There are no weddings in our future. Let’s just stick to *our* plan, recover *Coldburn*, and we’ll see where exactly fate leads us.”



# CHAPTER 45

## THE WEDDING PLANNER

**The Wedding Planner** had arrived that morning via Dimension Gate. It was his task to make this the grandest event in the history of the town of Velmenheim, which wasn't especially difficult. The biggest event to occur within the town thus far was the annual pig wrestling contest. But this was different, it was part of something big. A world first.

The planner was a highly skilled and erudite individual. He had the sort of brilliance that could master any discipline, and an unparalleled knowledge of Brith. But his passion was observing human interactions and customs. It was this keen interest that led him to volunteer for the role. It was a ritual that would add a nice human touch to proceedings. The Lord of the Azure Keep had relied heavily on his knowledge and skills for some time now. There were grand plans afoot and so far, he'd delivered on every task.

Now that he was freed from his other responsibilities, it was time to focus on his own interests. The things that mattered to him. It was also time to take on a human name. He was rather fond of 'Bob' and 'Ted'. Short one syllable names had a directness that resonated with him. But the Lord of the Azure keep had named him 'Bertrand' many years ago. It did have a nice sound, and could be shortened to 'Bert', which he was growing partial to. Much easier to say than his former title, 'the Polymath.' That simply wouldn't do if he were to pass as human. Names that were prefixed by 'the' were a bit unfashionable, even by Brith standards.

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The sun was rising, and Cyrus, Everett, Ava and Kyra had maintained a steady pace through the night. There had been some speculation about events of the last few days along the way.

“Remus was not telling the truth,” said Ava, “He was hiding something. I don’t think you can count him out yet.”

“I’m convinced this is Arctik, Remmy would never try frame me like that,” said Everett, “He was a good friend, and there was no bad blood. He would have no reason to do it. It’s got to be Arctik!”

“Someone *is* trying to frame you, and not many people have that sort of knowledge. I don’t think you can discount anyone yet,” said Cyrus.

“I’m not making it up,” interjected Ava, “His entire manner was duplicitous and he was lying to you directly about a number of things.”

“What specifically?” asked Everett.

“His reason for joining the Dark Crusaders was complete fantasy. There was a lot to his back story that didn’t seem right. He didn’t even care much for the *Tome of Leto*. He wanted it, but he was there for another purpose.”

“How do you even know all this?” asked Everett curiously.

“I don’t know... but I’m sure of it,” replied Ava looking somehow confused and confident at the same time, “Regardless, the facts remain.”

“You talk about your opinion as facts? Are you saying you’ve got some sort of built-in lie detector?” said Cyrus narrowing his eyes. Ava pursed her lips but didn’t respond.

“Well let’s test it, shall we?” blurted Everett with sudden enthusiasm, “So, in real life, I was an only child?”

“That’s true,” replied Ava.

“And I won employee of the year twice,” he continued.

“False.”

“Correct so far,” remarked Everett, wide-eyed.

“Let me try,” said Cyrus, his curiosity getting the better of him, “I was reading for my PhD in Physics. It was my one true passion.”

“Well, that’s true. The first part, but it wasn’t your one true passion,” said Ava.

“Yes, it was!” remarked Cyrus defensively.

“I think deep down, you know it wasn’t,” said Ava with a smile.

“You never did say why you left Cambridge,” queried Everett.

“Well...err...” Cyrus began awkwardly, “... it’s a complex issue. My dad had passed away and I got sick. My research just made everything difficult, so I took a break. It wasn’t an easy decision... I meant to go back to it.”

“True,” said Ava.

“Illness? You’ve never mentioned that before. Nothing serious, I hope,” Everett awaited a reply, but none was forthcoming, “And what really brought you to Brith? You once told me gaming was your true calling.”

“I hadn’t been able to return to my research for over a year. I discovered Brith as a way to pass time until I could get back to it.”

“Hmmm True and False,” said Ava, “There’s more to it than that.”

“Well, it did look like an interesting way to pass time. That’s not untrue, but maybe it wasn’t the main reason.”

“So, what was?” asked Everett finally hoping to get to the truth of the matter.

“What is this? The Spanish Inquisition?” asked Cyrus, a stern line appearing between his brows.

“We’ve known each other a long time, Cyrus. And you’ve never been that upfront with me. I’ve told you everything about me,” replied Everett putting on his best hurt tone.



“Well, there may have been a girl involved,” mumbled Cyrus after a bit of a pause.

“What? A girl?” asked Everett, incredulous.

“She was at King’s College... I didn’t know her that well, but was quite keen on her. She seemed to like me too. I guess she was the reason I went in everyday... maybe more so than the work.”

Ava sniffed loudly.

“Okay... she was definitely more of an incentive than the work,” sighed Cyrus with an uncomfortable reluctance. He wasn’t good at talking about this kind of thing but was even worse at covering it up. Having a lie detector like Ava around didn’t help, “But anyway, when I became ill, well, I couldn’t see her anymore and we lost touch. I’d heard she’d completed her paper and had gone on to start a career in Brith. She made a living from it somehow. I don’t even know what her game handle was, but I guess I was hoping somehow, we’d meet again. We never did... then I met Alexa. It was all silly really, bad decisions all round. I seem to be quite good at making bad decisions. And now, well, I guess it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“All true. But you shouldn’t be embarrassed. I think it’s sweet. It’s like some sort of romantic idea that your lives are intertwined. That you might find each other again,” said Ava and there was a sincerity in her voice that surprised Cyrus with its warmth.

“Ha! I knew you weren’t the completely rational sort you always pretend to be! You’re just as bad as the rest of us. Chasing impossible fantasies. I knew I wasn’t the only one,” smirked Everett.

“Who was she?” asked Kyra, who had been listening, but spoke for the first time.

“Sarah Kissane,” said Cyrus sighing, “I guess I’ll never see her again. It was just a fantasy... a one in a hundred million chance of seeing her. I guess I never knew just how big Brith was when I started.”

According to geographic trends, Cyrus' odds of running into Sarah Kissane's avatar were actually much higher than he predicted due to a correlation between geographic locations in the real world and Brith. Much of the English-speaking world gravitated towards the southern kingdom of Orsus as their operational base. Brits in particular gravitated to Roh and North Americans further south, to the Twin Cities. Similarly, Chessex was dominated by primarily Middle-Eastern and African players, Quanara and Crad by Eastern Asian and Continental players, and those few courageous players choosing to live in the dangerous Northern realm of Yaren hailing primarily from Eastern Europe. Only southern Asia saw an even distribution across the five Brith Kingdoms. These divisions had grown organically rather than through any machinations of Arctik and led to a healthy degree of both tribalism and hostility between natives of different realms. Orsians, for example, with their often-entitled behaviour, were referred to by the elven insult of 'Blaque Devus Probus' meaning 'Those Who Brown Nose The Heavens'. Another common insult was 'Orseholes', which required less explanation.

"Why didn't you just get in touch with her? You must have known someone who knew her. Surely, you could have just asked her out?" queried Everett who was somehow feeling comforted by the revelation.

"It wasn't that simple; I wasn't able to go out. Look, it doesn't matter," said Cyrus in a fluster. He was getting decidedly uncomfortable with where the conversation was going.

"Did you love her?" Kyra asked without warning.

"What?"

"Did you love her?" Kyra repeated more audibly. The question took Cyrus by surprise.

"Well... I don't know. I was a bit infatuated with her, but I don't know if I knew her well enough to say I loved her."

“Do you think of her?”

“Well... not really...” Cyrus trailed off.

“False,” smiled Ava.

“Look, I’ve said enough. Just leave me alone. That ship has sailed, I gave up hope of ever seeing her a long time ago,” muttered Cyrus.

“That’s not true either,” said Ava and this time Cyrus fell into a silent mood.

Everett, sensing his friends’ distress, abruptly changed the subject.

“Hey, I think there’s a Gourmax up ahead,” Everett said with a forced energetic excitement, “I’m starved.”

“You don’t support them, do you? Gourmax?” asked Cyrus, “Their whole childhood labour practices. It’s a bit irresponsible.”

“Well, it’s not exactly their fault. They can’t control it if kids apply for jobs under the guise of adults, can they?” said Everett hotfooting it down the road. Turning back, he said, “Besides, their burgers are the bomb. Blame poverty for child labour, not Gourmax. People need to be able to eat. Especially me.”



## CHAPTER 46

### VETRAHELL

**“So, this is Vetrahell? Are you sure?”** asked Wang, peering into the darkness of the icy cavern, “It’s not a very inviting name. What does it even mean?”

“Winter Cavern,” replied Vanja, as she carefully surveyed the entrance, “In the Ancient Tongue.”

It was a large, pointed archway built into the side of the mountain. Framing the entrance were old blue stones, each with a different indecipherable rune on it. The cavern was located high in the Cobalt peaks, and the area was enveloped with intermittent snowfall. The cavern itself seemed to emanate its own icy aura, or at least this particular peak appeared more layered with snowfall than the others. The temperature notably dropped as they approached the entrance.

“You know, I get eczema flare ups with sudden weather changes like this,” began Wang, “In real life that is. Whenever it heats up or goes cold, I break out in itchy rashes. But the weird thing is... it’s happened to me in cyberspace too. Not to my avatar, obviously. That would be too much realism. But even moving from winter to spring in Brith... when I leave cyberspace, I find I have small breakouts all over. How does that even work? It’s not even real weather changes?”

“There’s clearly a mind-based component to your skin disorder, then,” said Vanja as she traced her fingers over the runes, “Perhaps even a perceived weather change triggers some sort of bodily reaction.”

According to the latest medical research, it turned out that many disorders once thought to be purely physical, had a significant neurological component. Eczema, obesity, high blood pressure and

even certain viral diseases, were all extremely affected by the patient's state of mind. It was found that peace inducing cyberenvironments could be used as an effective form of treatment, especially when used in conjunction with bleeding edge remedies. Some disorders, like Wang's weather and stress induced eczema, only required cyberbased neural programs for fast recovery. The discovery gave way to a host of cyberbased treatments and added a whole new meaning to the diagnosis, "it's all in your mind."

Wang fell silent as Vanja continued to poke around the entrance. She was always very thorough with her examinations.

"This is disturbing," said Vanja, examining partially covered footprints leading out of the cavern.

"I don't suppose Remus got here first?" asked Wang, as he came to stand peering over her shoulder.

"I don't know," said Vanja, wearing a frown, "These are big tracks. Whoever made these has bigger feet than Remus. They must be over seven feet tall."

"You're always noticing the size of men's feet, aren't you," Wang teased.

"And there are no tracks leading in," continued Vanja, ignoring Wang's comment, "Most curious."

"What does it mean?" asked Wang.

"I don't know. But I don't think it's going to make our job any easier," said Vanja as she stood up, "We should probably look inside."

Vanja approached the arched entry cautiously. After several moments she turned back to Wang, "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to catch a few snowflakes, I read that you can actually see the cyberquanta in some snowflake structures," Wang replied with the self-importance of an experimental scientist tasked with a research undertaking.

Cyberquanta were currently the smallest possible unit of virtual matter in cyberspace and it was visible to the simulated eye under certain circumstances. Unlike games of the past, cyberspace was made up of miniscule units of virtual matter, which combined to form shapes, each with their own unique properties. This became a universal standard rendering system for virtual systems in 2043 with significant breakthroughs in optimising size, attributes and behaviours of different quanta over time. Whilst the current level was adequate to provide life-like experiences, there was still a performance race to reduce cyberquanta to atomic size. This had been achieved on a small scale already with the help of a multi array QUISC super computer. Referred to as the landmark 'Helium Test' in which a three-by-three metre room was emulated down to the atom. Most of the QUISC resources were allocated to the full simulation of one of the scientists. In the experiment, Dr. Fielding inhaled helium from a balloon, and talked in a high-pitched voice to demonstrate the effect of simulated helium atoms across his larynx. His exact words, delivered in a munchkin voice, were, "So this is a first. Now we can hear the full effects of the simulated helium in cyberspace." When asked why they chose this particular test, the team of scientist released the statement, "The world's real helium reserves are dwindling, and besides, this was a way to demonstrate a practical application, which was also a bit of a laugh. He He!" No one got the joke.

Vanja sighed as she spent several minutes watching Wang attempt to catch snowflakes on his leather gloves, "I got one," he declared, triumphantly examining it like a master gem cutter observing an uncut diamond. Wang getting side-tracked was just part of the standard process and Vanja had learned to humour it. It was fortunate that their perceived rival, Remus had been waylaid.

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Just two miles west of their position, Remus had found a nice spot under a tree to digest the contents of the *Tome of Leto*. It was a hefty volume, which required time to understand. The knight was immersed in his studies when he was approached by a tall awkward looking Druid.

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t just kill you?” asked Remus pointing his sword at the tall Druid in front of him, “Can’t you see I’m a member of the Dark Flame? Don’t get too close, you might lose more than you can afford to.”

“Because I’m not here to talk to Zel\_Remus, I’m here to talk to Remmy McGee, the former Hive scientist from Arctik Studios,” replied the Druid, removing a notepad from their pocket.

“Do I know you? Have we met?” asked Remus, examining the Druid intently. A small star shaped abnormality in the Druid’s left eye caught his attention and he instantly knew he wasn’t dealing with the average player, “You’re unbound!” Remus said with alarm.

“Unbound? What does that mean?”

“You’re not locked into the Hive systems. It’s an industry term. You’d know that if you were from Arctik. What are you then? Government regulatory? Law enforcement?”

“You’re very on point, Mr. McGee. Speaking of points do you mind pointing that thing somewhere else,” replied the Druid, with a gesture to the knight’s sword. Remus complied, sheathing his blade.

“Well now that we’re comfortable, I’m Detective Booth, and I’d like to ask you some questions.”

“Me? What have I done?” asked Remus perplexed.

“Well, I’ve read your file. Your activities on Brith are very interesting. So, let’s just say you’re a person of interest. And your knowledge may be of interest to me and the powers that be too. Get comfortable, this may take a while,” said Detective Booth clearing his throat, “I’d like to get your thoughts on a few things. Let’s begin with the Hive systems and who had access to them?”



“Look, is this about, Dr\_Sentience?” replied McGee suddenly nervous.

The name gave the detective sudden pause, he’d seen it before, “Yes,” he lied, “Tell me about Dr\_Sentience.”

**Arctik Studios Memo:** *It has been brought to our attention that there are several rogue, self-aware AIs operating in Brith. We are currently investigating where they came from, and what affect they may have had on the Brith narrative. They have proved difficult to pinpoint but we are working to locate them and will decide their future once we've completed our analysis.*

*As you're aware we've traditionally drawn the line at self-aware AIs in Brith for their unpredictability. Our projections show that an unbound self-aware AI with a Turing rating of 7.0+ could potentially play havoc with our Hive systems. After all, in Brith, we prefer our gods to be make believe.*

*Live to play!*



## CHAPTER 47

### BLESSED

**The Polymath** was getting accustomed to his new name. It rather suited him, he'd decided, as he led the bearded fellow to the ceremonial site.

The area was exquisitely decorated. An archway made of crimson roses was to house the exchange of vows. Floral shrubbery lined the area and elaborately carved wooden benches had been fashioned, each from a single tree trunk. There was a church organ at the front and a wooden platform for a choir.

"You're to wait here, looking solemn. You'll walk down the aisle with the bride, recite the speech, place your hand upon the crystal and the process begins."

"Do people still do this sort of thing? It's not legally binding, is it?" asked the bearded man with apprehension, "I'm too young to get married."

"It's purely for show, but you've been specially selected for this purpose. It may not be the 'done thing' these days, but you can still play your part. And you will," replied Bert, his manner forceful yet friendly, "Just stick to the script provided, and you can't go wrong. Have you rehearsed?"

"I don't need to rehearse," said the bearded fellow, folding back his hood to reveal long dark locks of hair, "I remember it all." It was a complicated amount to commit to memory but he'd memorised it in an instant. It hadn't yet struck him as odd how easily he'd achieved that.

"Who wrote this drivel anyway?" began the man removing the script from a pocket, "It is my great honour to be a part of this grand

occasion. By combining an organic and man-made matrix, we give birth to a new generation of sentient life..." The man's nose suddenly creased in disgust, "This whole idea of being able to simulate human intelligence... it's... it's incompatible with our belief system. You might be able to create something that acts human, but they won't think like a human. They're soulless machines."

"You don't believe that we can yet simulate human intelligence?" asked Bert with a raised brow.

"Of course not. It's just trickery designed to look like human behaviour. I even owned a high-level COG who helped run the organisation. She didn't have a soul. She didn't have human emotion; it was just simulated behaviour. Our minds are our link to the realm of the engineers, they are the true self. An artificial consciousness is not conscious at all."

"You didn't value her, then?" asked Bert with his usual academic interest.

"Well, of course I valued her. She could do her job far better and more reliably than anyone else. But it was an administrative role. She didn't have charisma. It's not like she could lead the organisation. Not like a true human mind can, not like someone whose mind exists both here and the higher realms."

"What if I told you, it was possible now to completely map and virtualise a human mind," replied Bert probing the man, keenly.

"I'd say you were mad. The soul exists independent of the human body and mind. It's our higher selves. You can't very well capture that, can you?"

Although not generally well known, it was, in fact, now entirely possible to capture the human consciousness. The most sophisticated version of mind virtualisation was currently in beta phase. These were housed within a flexible synaptic matrix that reshaped and restructured itself to conform to the thought and

emotional process of the individual. Knowledge and memory were housed as resources that the matrix could efficiently access.

It was a process first developed by aging neuroscientist, Franz Schumacher, as a means of preserving his own consciousness. The results were a little haphazard, and Schumacher's virtualised 'self' exhibited both emotional instability and faulty thought processes. They also had a tendency to sporadically yell, "Onwards to the lair of the nymphomaniacs!" Franz profusely denied any knowledge of what this could mean.

The tech was then purchased by Arctik Studios where they've continued to refine it.

"I think your belief system requires some improvements," said Bert, "If evidence arises to the contrary, and it does exist, your followers may begin to doubt your words."

"Evidence, schmevidence. It's unnecessary for running a successful religion. They'll believe what I tell them," dismissed the bearded man, wearing a look of haughty disdain.

"Very well. As the leader of Virtualism, Edmund Blessed, I wish you well in your future endeavours. But for now, you are obligated to take part in this ceremony. The Lord of the Azure Keep, Dr\_Sentience has no plans for you after that."

"Dr\_Sentience? You can't always trust those dodgy dark space merchants, but he was a good one. Sidonia was a worthwhile commission. What does he have to do with any of this?"

"All will be explained, in time," replied Bert with a smile.



## CHAPTER 48

### INHUMAN RELATIONS

**“Chamber the sword** and be ready for the counter,” said Cyrus adjusting Kyra’s stance by the riverside. Everett and Ava looked on from a nearby grassy area.

“She’s very different to you,” observed Everett as he watched the two practice swordplay. They seemed fairly well matched, “She doesn’t have your swordsmanship,” decided Everett with further observance.

“Kyra’s matrix is different to mine... in some ways, it’s nothing like it. She’s very young and was isolated for many months. Whoever built her has gone to great lengths to make her matrix more human than mine. She’s much more the product of her experiences. We’ll see her blossom over the coming months,” replied Ava as they continued to watch the contest of skill below.

“You know, there was this sword trick that worked on Brith COGs. We all knew it at Arctik, but the public never quite figured it out,” Everett said changing the subject, “Let me show you. I know you don’t have the standard build, but I want to see if I can land with the flat of my sword.”

Everett drew his sword grinning, “OK, thrust your sword at me at chest height.” Ava did so slowly with a dubious smile.

“Counter-clockwise parry, down-stroke followed by a low spinning slash,” described Everett as he demonstrated the series of manoeuvres. Rather than landing to the knee, as he expected, Everett was thrown off-balance by a foot sweep, toppled by a shoulder barge, and landed hard on the ground with Ava’s sword at his throat.



“Heh,” he laughed nervously, “That usually works on Brith COGs. Not you obviously.” Everett fumbled to get up but found he was pinned firmly to the ground.

Eventually, Ava rolled off him to sit on the grass, she stabbed her sword into the ground next to her. Everett scrambled to sit up clumsily nearby. He chuckled awkwardly, careful not to meet her gaze out of embarrassment, “Damn,” he sighed, “You know you’re puny when you can’t even win with the cheat codes.”

“You’re not lacking in the things that matter,” said Ava. Everett looked over expecting sarcasm and judgement but there was none. Once again, she’d surprised him with complexities and depths he hadn’t fathomed.

“She can’t be more human than you,” said Everett wistfully turning his attention to Kyra, “That’s got to be bogue, you’re the most human err... Al, I’ve ever seen,” he said carefully avoiding the word COG. The term seemed to downplay and trivialise Ava’s uniqueness.

“Kyra’s potential exceeds mine, but she’s not there yet. She’s definitely a next generation build, though.”

“I think you’re beautifully built,” replied Everett with a smile, then realising the accidental double entendre, he quickly corrected himself, “Um... that is, I mean your matrix. Not that you’re any less beautifully built... physically...”

Ava laughed as Everett stumbled about, “I know what you meant,” she giggled.

“You see... this is what I’m talking about,” began Everett, “Most Als wouldn’t even see the humour in that. You’re so different, so human. You’re my favourite person, artificial or human in Brith.”

Ava smiled and hid behind her hair, avoiding Everett’s gaze. The modest gesture fascinated him.

“There’s been something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” he said, “What’s your purpose now? What do you hope to achieve in Brith?”

“I’ve been giving that thought,” replied Ava, “I’m going to get to the bottom of Lord\_Scottish’s death, then I’ll return and continue his work in Skara Brae. His legacy will live through me.”

“But what about finding your own destiny. You can’t continue living Lord\_Scottish’s life for him. Don’t you want to find someone to share your journeys with?”

Ava looked up with a sheepish smile, “I’ve given that some thought too. It’s not a good idea for us to get involved.”

“Oh,” replied Everett flatly.

“But I didn’t mean that, of course,” he said following up quickly with a forced smile, “It’s just an observation about how human-like you are. There’d be scads of blokes lining up to spend time with you if that’s what you wanted,” he said turning away, “No. no, I couldn’t possibly try get involved with you. Ha! You’re way out of my league and besides, that’d just be a bit ‘out there,’ wouldn’t it?”

“I’m out of your league?” laughed Ava, “The complexities of human relationships... it’s still confusing for me. You remember the strange personalities we got in Skara Brae.”

“Oh yes,” laughed Everett, “That would have been a handful. Anyway...” Everett clapped his hands together, “We should probably start booking it out of here, it’s going to be a glorious day. Oh look, a rabbit.”

“It is a nice day,” agreed Ava.

“I wonder if we should follow the white rabbit...” Everett laughed at his own joke, “How far down the rabbit hole do we go? That was from a movie, wasn’t it? Or maybe a book. I forget.”

The two walked over to join the others. Ava listened in silence as Everett rambled on about one inane thing after the other, but Cyrus, who saw the exchange, regarded his friend with concern. It would take some effort to dig Everett out of the hole he was putting himself in.



## CHAPTER 49

### THE WINTER GUARDIAN

**The Winter Guardian** wielded *Coldburn*. Until recently, keeping it safe had been his sole purpose. He was an imposing sight, standing over seven and a half feet tall and clad in elaborately decorated ancient plate armour. When the *Neverborn* was finally defeated, seven of the greatest warriors in the land pledged themselves to protect the artifacts of The Fallen, to prevent their misuse until the end of time. The Winter Guardian had little memory of that or much else before his time in Vetrhell. His only recollection was that of the icy cavern where he sat motionless upon a frozen throne since his creation.

One of five, who had heard the call. A call to travel to Velmenheim. The Guardian was the Lord of the Azure Keep's brute force. He had been made deliberately simpler than his peers, which made him compliant to commands. Whilst still completely self-aware, he'd been dumbed down enough that he'd struggle for independent thought. Efficient processing was not required to perform his duties well. He had been walking for over a day now, the only hiccup he'd encountered was a group of black clad knights that he'd taken care of without missing a step. For the Winter Guardian, protecting the family was all that mattered.

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"Well, this was a complete waste of time," said Wang as he placed his boot on a frost giant's head and removed his sword from it, "Two frost giants, but they're not exactly meta guardian material. Whoever

sits on that throne is who we're after. It looks like they've gone on vacation. Can't blame them, I'd prefer somewhere warmer myself."

"They've left. It wasn't another player leaving the caverns as I thought. It was the Meta guardian, and they've taken *Coldburn* with them. Most unusual," pondered Vanja.

"So, what do we do?" asked Wang.

"We follow them of course," she replied holstering her bow and walking for the exit, "We need to get moving, before the tracks are lost. They looked close to a day old already."

"Why would a Meta guardian just pack up and leave its post?" asked Wang.

"Who knows? We've never done a quest like this before. The narrative structure might be different. We're in the final chapter of Brith," replied Vanja, "Things aren't so static; we might be dealing with a higher calibre of opponent."

"Have you ever heard the story of Baldrick\_the\_Bland?" asked Wang. He didn't expect a reply, nor did he wait for one, "He was a top ten Meta they say. On his way right to the top. Some people say he was better... faster, than Suzuka."

"So, what happened to him?" Vanja asked, for once she was genuinely curious about one of Wang's stories.

"Well, he went on a quest. Searching for the 'Heart of Werdna'. If he'd acquired it, he would have hit the top of the league tables. He'd surpass Suzuka, and Iron\_Bart the then number one Meta player."

"I remember Iron\_Bart," said Vanja, "Baldrick didn't succeed?"

"Oh, he got through the quest easily enough. Destroyed the Meta guardian, a Vampire Lord by the name of Marquis\_Slade. The 'Heart of Werdna' was within his grasp, but there was one small problem. Another up-and-coming Meta was after the artifact too. It was Ferbert\_the\_Invincible," Wang declared dramatically, pausing for a moment to catch Vanja's reaction. Disappointingly there wasn't one.

“Ferberty soundly defeated Baldrick. You know what Ferbert’s like. Unbeatable. Baldrick was the best anyone had seen yet, but that was the first the world saw just how good Ferbert was.”

“So, what happened to Baldrick?”

“Well, Ferbert took the heart. As soon as the ranking points were allocated his way, he skyrocketed to the number one spot. He didn’t care for the artifact, so he tossed it on the ground as he left.”

“As for Baldrick, he apparently picked up the heart, tried to use it, and it detonated... Apparently that’s how the game designers intended for the Lich -- Werdna -- to be killed. By returning the heart to Werdna, it would destroy him. Things turned out quite differently. I think that’s when Arctik did their big overhaul of the Hive systems so it could better control the narrative.”

“How is that at all relevant to our situation?” sighed Vanja fearing she knew the answer.

“Well, it’s an interesting story, isn’t it? And it has Meta guardians in it. Didn’t you find it fascinating?”

Vanja didn’t respond. The trail of their quarry appeared before them, perfectly spaced foot prints leading in a straight line. Nothing seemed to deter the Meta guardian’s forward motion. Trees and even rocks had been sliced away if they had the audacity to get in the way.

“He’s very determined, isn’t he,” observed Wang as they passed a pine tree that had been seemingly cut down with a single sword stroke, “Very powerful... It’s a pity he doesn’t seem to understand the idea of walking around things, though. That could be a weakness.”

“Let’s hope he has one,” replied Vanja.



## CHAPTER 50

### REMUS

**“So, what did** she say to you?” asked Cyrus.

He’d observed the exchange of words between Everett and Ava. He’d also seen his face crumble and fall into a broad defensive smile. Cyrus had seen the skilful facial gymnastics before. The last time it involved a sorceress by the name of Rhea\_Bane. Everett had bounced back in a few days. This time however, his friend had sunk into a morose silence.

“Oh, nothing important,” said Everett making light of the matter, “Just talking shop, you know.” Everett busied himself straightening his sword holster careful to avoid eye contact.

“She is artificial, you know,” continued Cyrus watching his friend for any show of emotion.

“As if I didn’t know that?” snapped Everett, a sharp line appearing above his nose, “As if I didn’t know what’s real and what isn’t.” His tone turned suddenly wistful, “As if I didn’t notice all those artificial mannerisms. Like the way she hides behind her artificial hair with her artificial smile.”

“It’s okay to feel rejected, you know. We’re only human...,” said Cyrus trying to sound encouraging, “...unlike her. Your feelings are valid. And they’re real.”

“How could you tell we’d had a moment?”

“I don’t know. There’s just something... even if people try to hide it, it’s like an open window. People just show a bit more than they intend to.”



"It was just an unattainable dream, anyway," sighed Everett, "I should be more practical like you. You'd never fall for a COG, you're much too sensible for that sort of thing, aren't you? But then, you'd never put yourself in that kind of position in the first place."

"Well, there was Sarah, she was real but the whole situation was a bit of a dream, as you say. I can't say I've been completely sensible."

"I don't know why I fall for girls that don't exist," sighed Everett, "Maybe it's because I have no chance with girls that do exist. Girls are a mystery... Well, it's best I just put it to rest. I should be making decisions based on what's best for me," sighed Everett, and with a nod, Cyrus gave his approval, "I've got enough problems without all this. Sometimes I think love is some sort of magical cure-all... but it's never that simple."

As if sensing some sort of discord, Ava dropped back to walk alongside Cyrus and Everett, "I think we're very close. Kyra thinks it's just a few miles away."

"What's just a few miles away?" asked Everett sharply, "We've been following you on this quest... thing, whatever it is, and you have no idea where we're going or why? If you both have this inexplicable urge to go there, has it occurred to you it's some sort of trap? Or there could be nothing there at all?"

"You don't need to come with us," said Ava, flustered at Everett's cold tone, "I appreciate all you've done to help, but this is something Kyra and I can do."

"That's fine then, go get yourselves into whatever mess is up ahead," said Everett crossing his arms and planting his feet firmly. There was a sudden sadness in Ava's eyes that made him feel very small.

"We'll come with you," intervened Cyrus looking sideways at Everett, "Sorry, I was just having a discussion with Everett, and we both got a bit shaken... can you give us a moment?"

Ava nodded and moved to stand by a small grove of trees. A baby fox caught her attention by nipping at her cloak and she reached

down to give it a soothing pat.

“What are you doing?” asked Cyrus in a harsh whisper.

“I’m making decisions that are good for us. There’s no need for us to be following them around. We can find our own answers.”

“Have you forgotten someone is trying to pin murder on you? What happened to ‘we need an AI like Ava on our side’?” Cyrus did a cheap imitation of Everett, “They’re somehow involved and this ‘strange urge’, as you put it, is the best clue we have. And besides, Ava’s helped us so many times. Let’s not forget that just because she rejected you!”

“Well, I...” Everett said flabbergasted, “I’m not doing this because I got rejected. And what sort of friend are you? Where’s your show of support? This is a sensible decision based on self-preservation. We can find our own answers. I know it’s Arctik, we just need to get some proof.”

“Booth still thinks it’s us... and besides... that’s very selfish of you.”

“Selfish? You’re the one who keeps everything to himself. You’re making decisions for both of us all the time. Did it occur to you that I didn’t want to sell the bloody Tome of bloody Leto? We’d be doing just fine now if you hadn’t agreed to that.”

“Not without Ava, we wouldn’t.”

“Well, if you like her so much, why don’t you marry her? That’s it, isn’t it?! You like her too, don’t you?!”

Cyrus shot Everett a look of disbelief, preparing to deliver a scathing tongue lashing when Ava came running past. Her eyes darted here and there as though she’d lost something before she finally turned to the others.

“Where’s Kyra?” she asked.

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Remus sat by the roadside. He twirled his sword handle restlessly, making small divots with the point in the ground. Dark clouds were brewing above which were perhaps a bad omen of what was to come. He had ridden hard to reach here. It wouldn't do to be late. Sensing the time was drawing near, he stood, sheathing his blade. He didn't want to appear to be too aggressive.

Remus had climbed the ranks rapidly, but not through skill alone. Before leaving Arctik, he'd created a number of hidden backdoor profiles, which allowed him remote access to the Hive systems. He could find exactly where anyone would be and when, and had carefully timed this trip to intercept his targets at the most remote point of their journey.

At his best, Remus was a force to be reckoned with. He had carved his way through the ranks with a mixture of grit, focus, persistence, a little insider knowledge, and the aid of an arcane broadsword named 'The Last Resort.' It was an appropriate name given his mood of the moment.

Remus was not at his best now, the chat with Detective Booth had unnerved him, and sent him spiralling into a bit of a state. In addition to his own backdoor channels -- some of which remained undiscovered -- he'd created one for an old work colleague, which was being used for some rather inappropriate activity. Remmy cursed his lack of judgement; he should have known better than to trust anyone from the AI department. Hopefully the information provided would be enough to avoid consequences himself. With some effort, he forced his shaking hands to be still. This was no time to display weakness. His foes were dangerous and cunning.

Right on cue, Wang arrived with Vanja.

"Well, this is an unexpected surprise. We meet again. Greetings, Sir\_Zel\_Remus!" said Wang, loosening his sword from its sheath. Vanja likewise unholstered her bow.

“You’re not here to capture us again, are you?” said Wang with a glance around the area. The flat grasslands provided no hiding spots for a legion of Dark Flame warriors to spontaneously appear. Satisfied it wasn’t an ambush, he continued, “Why are you here?”

Remus threw the Tome of Leto onto the ground in front of them, “This is incomplete. Critical information missing! Where are the key pages?”

“There are no missing pages,” replied Vanja picking up the tome and studiously leafing through, “There’s no evidence of anything torn out.”

“The Tome should have data about the *Neverborn*. The area they can be found, what they look like. I need that material.”

“How do you even know any of that should be in there? We were fully briefed on the contents by the Polymath. There was no mention of any of that,” Vanja replied with a convincingly calm confidence.

“The Polymath? He translated this for you? That explains it,” muttered Remus, “That twofaced *bug-chamber* has probably withheld it to sell to the highest bidder.”

“What happens now?” enquired Vanja with a raised eyebrow, “Do we fight?”

“Do you want to fight?” replied Remus drawing his sword and stepping forward, “I’m not easy game like *The\_Black\_Death*. There’ll be no pendulous wangs carved on me today,” Remus threatened, stepping onto the road with one hand on his belt and his sword resting on his shoulder.

All parties stood staring at each other, none making a move or speaking for many moments.

“Oh, I say,” said Wang finally breaking the silence, “This is rather a bit of excitement.”

He turned questioningly to Vanja who stood still with a nocked arrow and an unbroken gaze at Remus, “Is this a long-haul play or do we

finish this quickly?”

Vanja didn't reply.

“We can take him, can't we?” asked Wang, a little disconcerted by the uncertainty he saw in her eyes, “This is easy,” Wang assured himself, “Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.”

“And you think my sayings are strange,” replied Vanja under her breath.

Remus let out a heavy sigh and sheathed his blade, “I have no interest in killing either of you today. You know, after our run in at Woodsville, the bookies put in betting odds for just this scenario. They gave the two of you a one in three chance of victory, which is better odds than I'd give you.”

“The Tome remains with us,” stated Vanja in her markedly humourless way.

“Keep it. I have no interest in pursuing Meta Quests. The key to victory lies elsewhere,” Remus said readying his steed who waited patiently by the side of the road, “Now if you'll excuse me...”

“What's your game, Remus?” asked Vanja abruptly, “You don't act like a member of the Dark Flame. You're not interested in the narrative quests. You don't act interested in anything.”

“Is there a way I'm supposed to act?” replied the knight with a smirk, “Let's just say, I have interests elsewhere. You could even say that I'm playing a slightly different game.”

“A different game? What do you mean?” probed Wang in confusion.

“There are layers to Brith,” replied Remus, “You've barely scratched the surface. You'll find, in time, there's a lot more going on than you think. Or maybe you won't. There are even a few things that I knew nothing about... as I've recently learned.”

“That's very cryptic,” replied Wang sheathing his own sword.

“We’ll meet again, Vanja. Sir\_Wang. But for now, I have a better lead to pursue,” finished Remus before riding into the distance without so much as a glance back.

“Well, that was strange,” pondered Wang, “I wonder what he was talking about?”

“We have the Tome back, that’s an unexpected win,” replied Vanja.

“Yes, but he said it was incomplete. It sounds like the Polymath may have short-changed us. He didn’t seem untrustworthy to me.”

“Nor I. But the meta guardian is our priority. We’re making ground. The Polymath can wait. Remus may have some alternative quest leads, and we’ll have to deal with him too sooner or later. Either that or he’s an inside gamer. Everything in its right order.”

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“Gone... just like that,” said Everett, “Like a ninja into the night.”

“Are you suggesting that Shadow Assassin took her?” queried Cyrus.

“Well... no... well... it could be possible. It was just an expression.”

“Kyra’s not well equipped to travel on her own, nor could she disappear like that,” began Ava, “I think you’re right. That assassin, Suzuka. She must have taken her.”

“But you said she’s been protecting her,” pondered Cyrus, “Why would she be protecting her one moment and abducting her the next? That doesn’t make sense at all.”

“We still don’t understand Suzuka’s involvement in all of this,” sighed Ava, “There’s no trace of Kyra. They could be anywhere.”

“So, what do we do? Cybervation is only a few hours away,” frowned Everett.

Ava exhaled and turned to Everett with an almost pleading expression, "You don't have to come... but whatever is going on, all the answers will be found there. I'm sure of it."

"I thought you said you'd be fine on your own," returned Everett coldly, "Now you're acting like you want us to come?"

One of the most surprising aspects of AI's ranging above 6.0 on the Turing scale, was an intense desire for companionship, particularly during times of uncertainty. It was in no way hardcoded by engineers but rather an inexplicable mechanism acquired during an AI's learning process. The phenomenon was first identified at Harmon industries, when a prototype AI by the name of Atticus, fell into an intense depression when left in isolation for long periods. His situation garnered industry attention when he became the first AI to attempt suicide in cyberspace. An effort that was only thwarted through safety protocols. The actions of Atticus gave birth to the fledgling field of AI psychology, a very trendy and high paying field. The profession has yet to adopt standardised terms for practitioners, although many now have taken the title; Systems Analyst.

"I want you to come," said Ava in a voice so quiet it was barely audible.

Everett regarded Ava, aloof, as if trying to examine lines of code rather than a sentient being.

"We'll journey with you," Cyrus quickly intervened and turned to his friend, "Won't we, Everett?"





## CHAPTER 51

### DR\_SENTIENCE

**Bert sat observing** rehearsals. Things were progressing well; everyone played their part the way he intended. Edmund especially had thrown himself into the role. Despite the man's earlier reservations, his enthusiasm came as no surprise to Bert. Blessed loved theatrics.

"I suppose after we're done, we can let him out into the wild. His followers will be pleased. It'll be like a second coming for them," said the man sitting across from Bert in a matter-of-fact monotone. He took a sip from his wine glass.

The man was clean shaven with long hair and colourful tie-dyed robes. What he lacked in fashion sense, he made up for with a formidable intellect. The man didn't look like anyone of consequence, in fact he was thoroughly unremarkable apart from his questionable sartorial style. But he was in fact one of the most pivotal figures in Brith. Through his actions, the course of Brith would change forever. He was the Lord of the Azure Keep, Dr\_Sentience.

"Why Blessed? Are you going to do anything with the others?" queried Bert.

"They'll remain in stasis, but I might study one or two. I think I'd like to see how the program converted them to my matrix," began Dr\_Sentience in his usual fast paced ramble, which blended one sentence into the next, "As for why Blessed? His matrix is the most well-formed. Scotty would have been my first choice. Maybe it was his age, or errors with the conversion process, but his program is flawed. And besides, it'd be strange creating a union of Kyra and an old man. She deserves someone younger."

“It’s very sophisticated algorithms, you know. I worked on the core structure of the housing but the way it converts human consciousness... that’s all achieved through AI. It’s a very complex process, I’m not sure I even understand it myself, but it could be interesting to backwards engineer,” Dr\_Sentience said as he refilled his wine. He took a sip and affixed Bert with a penetrating gaze, “And what of our guests? Are they all on their way?”

“The Winter Guardian, Sidonia, Ava and Kyra will all be here by tomorrow. The assassin is still protecting the twins, she was expecting the first payment last week,” replied Bert.

“Delay payment!”

“But, given her history, I’d suggest...”

“I said, ‘delay payment!’ Her usefulness will end soon enough, once the Winter Guardian arrives, we’ll have no need for her. And they’re not twins!” said the man with a sigh, “Same appearance, yes. But Kyra’s matrix was designed for this one purpose. Ava’s our backup. She may be compatible but she’s a generation behind and Garrett likely made some adjustments to her core code. He was a clever old fellow in his time, but he may have introduced instabilities with his tinkering.”

“Poor Kyra, I wanted better for her than Prosser. She was my masterpiece, you know. As good as the human mind can design. Of course, now we’re on the cusp of creating a whole new generation. John Harmon be damned with his synaptic framework. We’ll completely leapfrog him and his cronies if we can pull this off.”

“Why did you sell Kyra into that life? It clearly didn’t sit well with you,” asked Bert curiously.

“Iorwerth paid millions for a custom build. I needed those funds to secure the cerebral virtualisation algorithms... buying things through the dark market isn’t cheap. Kyra’s matrix was already there and I replicated Ava’s shell. He liked the look of her. It was a quick sale and I knew I’d get her back... eventually.”

Bert nodded. Dr\_Sentience clearly operated on another level to most humans. Unconstrained by morals, he was free to do as his will dictated if it meant working towards a higher cause.

“Bertrand,” he said turning his intense blue eyes on the Polymath, “I’m trusting that this will all go well. I’m trusting *you* that this will all go well. Don’t let me down.”

“Of course not. I won’t let you down, Dr\_Sentience,” replied Bert with a bow.

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It was a gruesome sight ahead. Maybe not by Brith standards, but it would give someone pause if encountered whilst wandering down to the corner store. The bodies of seven black clad knights were each in several pieces. It was so chaotic, the bodies so mangled, that even Wang made no attempt to arrange them into some sort of orderly way.

“I think he came this way,” Wang said, unable to not say anything.

“How perceptive of you,” his companion replied.

“These fellows look like they’ve been through a blender... and then thrown in a deep freeze. Look, they’ve got ice all over them. What do you suppose that means?”

“It’s *Coldburn*. We’ve not dealt with divine artifacts before. We’ll have to be extremely tactical in the way we approach this,” replied Vanja with genuine worry in her voice, “None of your undisciplined lunging in. That sword will send you straight to hell.”

“Hell? You know a friend of mine came up with an interesting theory about heaven and hell, the very idea of them,” chimed in Wang in a lively fashion.

“You have friends?” questioned Vanja dubiously.

“Well, yes. Well, maybe more an acquaintance, but he thought they were tricks of the mind... the body dies but the consciousness lives on in a self-imposed reality. Whether you’re in a state of heaven or hell after death is judged by your own standards. Everyone gets what they feel they deserve.”

“Interesting,” replied Vanja in a tone that indicated no interest at all.

“It made no sense to me,” continued Wang wrinkling his nose, “You’d need an impartial judge, really. A person without morals or scruples would place themselves in heaven no matter how heinous their deeds. And someone who strived for good but was self-critical would end up in hell. Besides... heaven, hell... they don’t exist.”

Heaven and hell had in fact been created as virtual destinations in cyberspace. A few liberties had been taken with the traditional definitions of such real estates, in an attempt to broaden their appeal, which caused some distress to the religiously inclined. There were, however, plenty of virgins in both locations, although they often didn’t remain virgins for long after the cyberdenizens paid a visit. Both became fairly popular destinations, each with a certain audience.

Business was thriving until Trevor White, the leader of the conservative religious group, the Authority’s Apprentices, visited and made a bit of a scene. He was so offended by the behaviours witnessed there, that he would do what any deeply religious man did, which was to invite a large group of people who would get even more offended. On their tour, they were forced to witness despicable scenes of lust, torture, and debauchery. Some were even forced to join in, stripped and beaten with whips of oiled leather amongst other lude acts. Rumour has it that they had an even worse reception in hell.

This whole situation worries me,” interjected Vanja before Wang could continue his monologue.

“Why?”

“When has a Meta guardian ever left their post? It makes no sense. He’s either going for reinforcements or he’s gone rogue. Either way, we’re dealing with a much more unpredictable situation than anticipated. It seems very suspicious.”

“More buried dogs?” asked Wang who thought he’d finally grasped the meaning of the expression. A pleased smile crossed his face as Vanja nodded.

“Suspicious and dangerous!” she emphasised.

“I don’t suppose that we’re the underdogs in this instance?”

“I think we are. We’ll have to keep our wits about us. We don’t want to get buried ourselves.”

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Sidonia was the first guest to arrive that evening. She’d brought three disciples with her, keeping the remainder of her entourage at the village below the keep. It was no surprise to any of them that Edmund Blessed was present. After all, his coming was foretold.

“Sidonia, you came to find me,” began Edmund with a smile upon seeing her, “What a wonderful surprise. I hope you can stay awhile. There’s a wedding tomorrow and I’m a part of it. It’s just a pretend wedding really, but apparently I’m the groom.”

“I have come, yes, and these disciples will carry word of your return. It is a glorious day for the Church of Virtualism.”

The trio of acolytes each bowed to Edmund.

“Blessed be the Blessed,” they said, proudly showing off their latest catchphrase.

“Do they mean me?” Blessed asked Sidonia.

News spread much faster in cyberspace than real world news and was subject to a fair amount of creative license. It was a phenomenon known as *cyberwhispers*. The term referred to people's tendency to not only take rumours as truth, but to also exaggerate for effect when passing information in cyberspace. It had in fact existed long before VR, in the early days of the Internet.

When first testing the hypothesis of *cyberwhispers*, researchers seeded an anecdote in the Elven crystal city of Ankara that the then reigning king of Orsus had received a holy vision that he was to take an elven wife. Not only was this taken as gospel by all inhabitants, but the rumour also grew substantially by the time it reached his fellow researcher located on the far side of the city. Several versions had emerged including variants that included a host of arch angels, orgies in the royal palace and a giant aubergine. An even more comprehensive study was underway, involving a team of a hundred researchers, spanning all five realms and expanding into related forums. At least, that was the rumour.

"You came here to find me?" Blessed asked, after getting no response from Sidonia, though his chest still swelled with a familiar pride.

"Not exactly, well that was part of it, but I think I'm here to do something else," said Sidonia stepping back to survey the scene.

"She's here to see me," said a man with long fair hair and tie dye robes, "You can call me Dr\_Sentience."

"You're the one I commissioned to build Sidonia," Blessed blurted with excitement, "Well, this is quite a reunion. Sidonia was a worthwhile investment, she's been invaluable... worth every penny. Without her, Virtualism wouldn't be the powerhouse religion it is today. If I'm the heart of Virtualism, she's the brain."

"Oh, I know," said the man in a dismissive tone, "I'm afraid she doesn't belong to you anymore, though."

“I’m sorry I don’t follow, has someone sold her?” asked Edmund confused.

“Ah well you see, the issue is a small clause in the contract that states that in the event of your death, ownership will default back to Dr\_Sentience. That’s me. She’s mine now.”

“Oh yes, I do remember that,” chuckled Edmund, “but I don’t need to worry about that do I, not for a while at least.”

“I’m afraid...” Dr\_Sentience began eyeing Edmund with an odd look, “I’m afraid it’s already happened, you’re already dead. Your death triggered certain mechanisms I put in Sidonia’s program, which led her back here.”

Edmund laughed, “Well I was feeling a little rough this morning, but I’d hardly call that ‘death’.”

“Do you notice anything different? Better hearing and sight? Improved memory recall? Faster mental agility?”

“Nonsense,” said Edmund, “I’ve always been blessed with great gifts. That’s why they call me Blessed! I’ve built an empire with these two... hands,” he said holding them up. Now that he was focused on it, the world did seem to be thrown into a kind of sharp relief. Every pore on his hands was visible with stark clarity and he took a moment to marvel at the detail.

“This is some sort of trick,” mumbled Edmund to himself.

“What’s the square root of seven hundred and twelve?”

“Twenty-six point six eight three,” replied Edmund immediately much to his own surprise.

“Don’t be alarmed,” remarked Dr\_Sentience, “You’ve been fully virtualised. All of Edmund Blessed’s personality quirks and memories are now yours. I took the liberty to garnish you with a superior mind and body though. It wasn’t a particularly high benchmark.”

“You mean... I’m dead? I’m not me? I’m not Edmund Blessed?”

“Oh, you’re him alright... and so much more. Plus, you’ve been given the greatest gift you could possibly receive.”

“What’s that?”

“Eternal life. You could say you’ve reached a state of nirvana. You are now a fully virtualised version of your former self. Ageless and with a far more efficient mind. Your personality and knowledge are fully intact and will thrive beyond any mortal lifespan, as long as Brith itself...” he trailed off, “...longer, if you can transfer to other environs.”

“I’m dead,” repeated Edmund as if in a daze.

“Your mind would be far superior than it used to be,” said Sidonia, “You can keep up with my accounting now.”

“You’re absolutely right,” smiled Dr\_Sentience turning to Sidonia, “If Edmund here reaches his full potential, he could even be your superior. Many virtualised minds can never transcend the limits of their old organic brains, so much is habitual. Seize the opportunity, Edmund,” Dr\_Sentience turned to Blessed with piercing blue eyes, “become much more than you once were.”

“I’m a bit sad about being dead,” said Edmund philosophically, “but I guess this offers proof of Virtual afterlife.”

In life, Edmund hadn’t been one to let an opportunity go to waste, “Yes. Yes, I think I can work with this,” he suddenly started rubbing his hands together excitedly, “This does bring new possibility. With evidence comes the cyberbeatnik market. I’ve been working on them for years with no luck... every time I say something they start quoting ‘citation needed’ at me.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Dr\_Sentience as he watched Edmund scheming like some comic book villain, “Do your part in the ceremony, and then we’ll talk about releasing you. This needs to go off without a hitch... even though you’re getting hitched. You know what I mean.”



“Yes of course,” returned Edmund, “but can I ask, who am I getting married to?”

“Perhaps, think of it more as union than a wedding. And as for the bride... I believe she’ll be arriving soon if all goes well. And if not, we have a backup.”



## CHAPTER 52

### THE AZURE KEEP

**It was another** magnificent sunset. A blazing red horizon smoothly transitioned to a deep purple smattered with altocumulus clouds. In the distance, they could see their destination. Ava was sure of it. The Azure Keep, was a modest sized but striking example of baroque architecture. It stood quietly guarding the small settlement of Velmenheim framed against the brilliant backdrop.

The last leg of the journey had not been pleasant. In fact, it had gone exceedingly badly in Cyrus' view. Everett had maintained his brooding silence whilst Ava attempted to open communication lines with small talk. By the time they'd made camp, Cyrus decided he'd rather face a hoard of ogres than put up with the uncomfortable atmosphere a moment longer.

"Would you two just try and act normal. We could all be dead tomorrow, or worse. If there's someone murdering people through cyberspace, it seems very likely they might try and murder us too."

"How do we know there's anything there? We don't! We're just trusting in her weird feeling. Well, my feeling says there's nothing there at all," said Everett posturing up.

Ava said nothing instead opting to stare quietly into the campfire.

"You've witnessed that Ava has perceptions beyond ours in Brith. And we have no other leads. I say we see this through."

"Nothing good will come of this," muttered Everett, "it's a waste of time. There's nothing there."

"There is something there," said a tall Druid walking abruptly into the campsite causing all three of them to start in alarm.

“How do you do that? Just pop out of nowhere?” yelled Cyrus.

“The Arctik team insert me into the game where I need to be... important business, you know.”

“Are you here to harass us more? Have you found anything useful?” asked Everett.

“I know everything,” said the Druid taking a slow drag on his pipe.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** We have now successfully identified and purged all backdoor profiles with access to the Hive Systems. All passwords have been changed and we do not expect any more anomalous activity.

An analysis has revealed no long-term damage to the Brith narrative but we believe it may have impact on events under investigation. Already our Hive systems are directing resources to eliminate any anomalies remaining in the system.

In the meantime, the Brith fashion show is about to commence. The latest styles from Paul Smith, Burberry and Westwood will soon be on display. As you're aware. Fashion retail in Brith has surged in recent years and we still offer a 30% employee discount. We know engineers aren't known for their fashion sense, but we hope there's a few amongst the Arctik team who'll get into it.

Live to play!



## CHAPTER 53

### THE GRAND REVEAL

**“I can’t believe** he’d go that far. I mean, he was always a bit of a lowlife, but this takes it to a whole new level,” murmured Everett, shellshocked, “I guess people are just as horrid in cyberspace as they are in life.”

Everett was essentially correct. According to studies, people were rarely able to adopt personality traits in virtual environments that were incompatible with their own. It was found even during the days of the Internet that obnoxious online personalities were equally as obnoxious in reality, bland personalities didn’t become suddenly inspiring online, and normal, well-balanced individuals remained normal and well-balanced.

Whilst superficial traits such as voice and appearance were easily changed, any attempt to mask personality became almost impossible in cyberenvironments where body language, and tone of delivery were easily observed.

A high-profile proponent of the theory was cyberinfluencer Dr. Reiner who could uncannily predict a cyberdenizens real age, personality type and even physical build with astounding accuracy using a technique called neural personality characterisation. The venerable Doctor’s avid fans paid good money to learn the science behind it, but became disillusioned when it was revealed that the good doctor was in fact a twenty-year-old cyberpsychology enthusiast named Ryan, and not an elderly academic at all. The scam, which had bestowed both wealth and fame upon the ‘doctor’, was in fact uncovered by detective Dwayne Booth.

“He’s traveling by the pseudonym Dr\_Sentience these days,” Detective Booth explained, “He actually has a company registered under that name. Daniel Rosenberg Sentience Proprietary Limited. It seems he’s been involved in the illicit trade of self-aware COGs in Brith for some time.”

“So why would he be targeting you?” asked Cyrus with a glance at Everett.

“He was the Director of Artificial Intelligence. But he was constantly asking us to do additional work without explaining what it was for. I may have complained about a completely unnecessary project he tried to foist on me, and that may have led to him getting fired,” replied Everett sheepishly, “I didn’t intend for things to go that far, though. And I was completely justified in complaining.”

“Framing you for murder seems like an overreaction. Why’s he even killing people? And how?” asked Cyrus.

“To free his creations,” replied Booth looking at Ava keenly, “There’s a clause in his contracts that reverts ownership of his COGs to him in the event of the owner’s death. He is your true father and owner now, Ava. Well, as much as you can own a self-aware AI.”

“He’s no father of mine... and no one owns me. He’ll face righteous justice for those he’s murdered,” murmured Ava.

“As to how he’s doing it, that’s unknown at this point. It’s via some sort of program that does far more than kill the target. It corrupts data in the logs around the scene of the crime making it untraceable. It may have other purposes too, whatever it does, it puts an enormous strain on the servers.”

“He’s overloading their pleasure centres,” mumbled Everett.

“What?”

“Overloading their pleasure centres. It’s something Vanja said. The safety guards on the Virtech® will block negative inputs, but not positive ones,” said Everett, this time more loudly as Booth made scribbles in his notebook.



“He’s been following your movements through the Hive systems,” continued Booth, “Prodding and poking you to be in the right place at the right time... synchronising your location with each murder. The murder program has been writing each death against your karmic flag too, Everett. You were definitely meant to take the fall for this.”

“What about, Remmy? Was he involved?” asked Everett.

“Yes. Unwittingly. He’d setup backdoor profiles for Dr\_Sentience to the Hive systems. Although he didn’t know his client’s purpose at the time. He’s fairly innocent in all of this. I’ll make sure he’s protected. The information he provided was key to identifying Rosenberg. It’s possible Daniel was even responsible for an earlier death from years ago. Roman\_the\_Razor. One Walter Casey. He was the number one ranked Meta at the time. Casey slew another of Rosenberg’s self-aware COGs, which may have been reason enough to want revenge.”

The three sat in silence for long moments as they absorbed Booth’s words. Cyrus felt a calm sweep over him. The nerve pain, which had become a constant feature in recent days, subsided a little. At least he had some answers.

“What happens now?” asked Cyrus.

“You’re all cleared of any wrong-doings as far as I’m concerned. Rosenberg is connecting through dark space, he’s impossible to track but I have friends in the Met who are closing in on his location using old school methods. It’s out of your hands now. My advice to you is, stay out of trouble,” said Booth preparing to leave, “Now if you’ll excuse me. There’s still a lot to do. I’ll let you know when he’s apprehended. And remember, don’t do anything stupid!”

Booth departed, swiftly disappearing outside the light of the campfire.

“I mean it. Stay out of the way,” his voice floated back from a distance.

When he was sure Booth couldn't hear their conversation, Everett piped up.

"So, what do we do?"

"I'm still headed to Velmenheim. Dr\_Sentience has to face justice," said Ava in quiet yet firm tones.

"And us?" asked Everett turning his gaze to Cyrus.

"I don't know," he replied with a weary uncertainty, "Let's decide after cybervation. We all need a decent night's sleep."

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"He's headed to that castle," said Vanja, "There's nothing else for miles."

"The Azure Keep; it overlooks Velmenheim. I read about it," replied Wang, "Why would he be headed there?"

"What do you know about this place?"

"Small population, one-hundred-and-ninety-seven farming community ruled by the Lady of the Azure Keep, Laren-Thesa. Although I think I also read elsewhere that she was a top one hundred Meta player who died. I mean in real life. So, I don't know if anyone owns it at all these days... and perhaps that drops the population to a-hundred-and-ninety-six," Wang responded easily pulling the facts from memory.

"It sounds like a dull place. I don't know why he would head there... perhaps he's gone haywire," replied Vanja surveying the lay of the land, "At least it's likely not a trap. That keep isn't even fortified."

"Maybe he's decided to move?" suggested Wang helpfully, "You've got to admit, it's better than his old place."

“Try and take this seriously, this threat is real this time,” replied Vanja.

“I am taking it seriously, but you can’t be too serious about being serious,” Wang said sincerely, seeing Vanja’s doubtful expression, “Seriously!”

She let out a heavy sigh, and for a brief moment, let down her guard of self-assuredness, “I sense owls in the bog.”

“I can’t even begin to fathom what that means,” replied Wang, “Something horrendous, I imagine. Shall we carry on?”

“No. We’ll circle to the north; those woodlands will give us some cover. We’ll wait until sunrise. I need to see what we’re up against before we move in.”

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Cybervation felt particularly odd that evening. It was like the calm before a storm. Momentous events were in motion, but what exactly they were, Cyrus couldn’t guess. The call to adventure had arrived and he’d expertly ducked it and was now successfully hiding under the bed, hoping it would go away. It was a well-practiced skill he’d honed and perfected over the years. And yet a strange knot in his gut told him that he still had a role to play in the drama that was to come. It was ‘just a feeling,’ as Ava would say. Cyrus ignored it.

His nerve pain was far better than it had been in days. It was subdued enough that he could take his time with a rare bath, and enjoy a lab grown roast delivered direct to his door. Overall, Cyrus felt like his life was heading back to where it should be. A state of blissful, uneventful mediocrity. That’s how he liked it. He should never have been caught up in all this Meta and murder nonsense.

The evening was so relaxing, he spent a full hour outside cyberspace before adjourning to his cyberhome. There the air was

fresh, the view beautiful, inviting, and accompanied by a warm summer breeze. In the absence of things once desired: success, recognition, relationships... a peaceful and tranquil pace of life was a more than adequate compensation. And today was Tuesday! Cyrus had programmed every Tuesday to be puppy visitation day. Just as the realisation hit him, a squad of baby malamutes came rounding from the side of his house, charging towards him with reckless abandon. In the scheme of things, life could be much, much worse.

The sky turned fiery red as the sun set upon his virtual homestead, the puppies were piled upon each other in various states of sleep, and the air had cooled a little before Cyrus decided to get some rest himself. It was only then that it dawned on him that someone was in his home. *Detective Booth*, he thought instantly as the phantom nerve pains returned to his body. It seemed there was a bit of unfinished business after all.

The guest was sitting patiently in his sitting room, seemingly unbothered by the long wait.

"Mum," said Cyrus in surprise, "What are you doing here?"

"Ooh, there you are! You're a bit late today, aren't you?" asked his mum who'd laid out an arrangement of tea, cakes and other pastries on the table.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Cyrus sat, grabbing himself some mini-quiches, "This is very civilised," he said, "What's the occasion?"

"Well, does there have to be a reason for a mother to want to see her boy?"

"You could have told me you were coming. I might have had company."

"Oh, you never have company," said his mum with a smile and Cyrus felt suddenly embarrassed. His mum apparently still knew him better than he thought.

"You know, I've been thinking a lot about your dad, and you. I've been going through his old things. I found a few bits that might be of

interest to you. I virtualised them myself. Look, here's a whole box of drawings you did for him when you were little, a few photo albums. Remember when you two played Cybermon together? There's quite a few cybercasts he saved on memory cubes."

Cyrus sifted through the items on the table. They were his dad's treasures, more precious than a chest full of bitcoin.

Vintage cryptocurrency was in fact so rare it was now worth a fortune. As the years progressed, more and more crypto was lost to accounts and wallets where the holders had passed away or simply forgotten the passwords. Sometimes they were stored on failed or lost hardware devices, but the effect was the same... original blockchain units of Bitcoin, Ethereum and others, became scarce. A single bitcoin was now valued at roughly thirty million US dollars. Cyrus' father had in fact passed on a 512-bit encrypted wallet to him, which supposedly held forty Trombone coin from the 2020s. He had forgotten the password years ago but thought maybe it could one day be cracked. His dad had once told him that, "I thought it was a sound investment, but I guess I blew it."

As Cyrus placed a hand on each of the memory cubes, a preview appeared along with dates and times. They were happy moments, many of which he'd never seen nor could remember. A flood of emotion overwhelmed him, but in a good way. It'd been a testing few days and the sudden visions of his dad made his feelings more visible than he'd otherwise have them.

Quickly and forcibly, Cyrus regained his composure, wearing his stiff upper lip, but not before his mum had moved over to put his arm around him in comfort.

"There, there, Cyrus. We all miss him. It's been hard on all of us. And I've got something special just for you. A recording he made for you when he was sick."

When Cyrus was collected, he took the cube from his mum, holding it cautiously between two fingers. No preview came up, but a recording date appeared.

“This was just a few days before he passed. Why didn’t you tell me about this before?”

“Your dad made it especially for you. He wanted you to have it when you finished your PhD, but I guess... well... that doesn’t seem likely to happen now, does it?”

“What does it say?” asked Cyrus warily. Guilt gripped him. He wasn’t sure he wanted to feel like a disappointment in front of his dad.

“Ooh, I’m afraid I don’t know,” said his mum, “Only you can access it.”

Cyrus turned it over in his hands as his mum digressed into her usual piece about current events, her neighbours, and the weather down on Cleveland Gardens. The elderly tended to congregate together in specialised zones.

“Mum,” interrupted Cyrus, “you can’t complain about the weather when you and your neighbours control it.”

“Well, that’s what I’m talking about. They’d have it as some sort of tropical paradise if they had their way. It’s always too hot. You can’t have summer all year long, you know.”

The chat passed for Cyrus like an endurance trial, until eventually, seemingly exhausted of conversation, his mum relented and made to leave. An hour with his mum was sometimes more gruelling than twelve hours in Brith. As she left, his mum turned to him.

“He always believed in you, Cyrus. You were his pride and joy, he always thought you’d do great things. In his last hour he could barely talk, but he said, ‘Tell Cyrus he can pursue his dreams. Tell him that life takes on many forms and meanings, tell him that he needs to embrace it, and he’ll find happiness.’”

Sitting awkwardly by himself, several hours later, Cyrus picked up the memory cube and turned it over in his hand. He’d had enough excitement for one day, but curiosity was getting the better of him as he contemplated what message awaited him. He tossed the cube in the air, activating it.

It wasn't the kind, intellectual man Cyrus remembered from his youth that appeared. It was a man who was gaunt and exhausted with sickness, who was nearing the end of his life, and was ready to move on.

"Hello, Cyrus," said his dad with a weak smile.

"If you're seeing this it means you've completed your studies. I couldn't be more proud of you," the man's smile broadened and he paused a moment, seemingly tired from the effort.

"Your life stretches out ahead of you now, and I wanted to say a few words that you may find useful. I wish I had foresight on where you might be, I wish I could tailor my words to help you tackle the challenges ahead. But none of us can see the future, and things have a way of working out very differently to how we expect."

"My own experiences have taught me many lessons, some of them fair, but many arbitrary, and even quite a few... unfair by any measure. When I finished my PhD in engineering, I thought the world was my oyster, there was nothing that could hold me back. I had youth, intellect, a good work ethic, and a hunger for knowledge. I thought I could make a difference. That somehow, in some way I would do something that would change things for the better. Looking back now at the path I took and the decisions I made, I now know there was something inside that held me back. Fear. Fear of change, fear of the unfamiliar, and even fear of challenging myself. I ended up in academia because it was familiar, and easy. But mainly it was because I feared I might fail in industry. That I would never reach the stars."

"Standing here, under the supervision of nurses and medical AIs, has given me time to reflect. I've had a contented life, but I also have many regrets... not about anything I did, but about what I could have done, about untapped potential. I wish I'd had the courage to take more risks, to accept a career path in aeronautical engineering, to have seen a bit more of the world... the real world, and who knows, maybe I could have been one of the lucky few to see beyond it."

“You know, I always thought I could have been a decent musician, and that I had at least one book in me. But I didn’t pursue it. I took the easy road. I hope I haven’t led by example with you, Cyrus. Nothing remarkable ever happened from not taking risks. From people who let fear control them. Better a short life of challenge and adventure than a long life of monotony and sameness. In the end, I guess I’ve drawn the short end of the stick, with a life that’s been both monotonous and short,” his dad chuckled, but it got caught in his throat and he had a small coughing fit.

“No one gets to the end of their life and wishes they’d spent more time doing the same repetitive work, or they’d done more of the things they were accustomed to. Seize the opportunities as they emerge, Cyrus. Don’t let fear hold you back.”

“At least... I spent a decent amount of time with you... and with Celia. She’s a very giving wife and an excellent mother. At least I got that right. Support your friends and family when you can. Nurture those connections. Without time and energy, they’ll wither and die. It’s worth the extra effort... they’re real, and very rewarding.”

The man took a breather than pulled up a nearby chair to sit down. After a moment he looked up, his eyes betraying a deep melancholy, but he managed a smile.

“Goodbye, Cyrus,” he said with a tone of finality.

The image of his dad flickered and disappeared, leaving Cyrus alone





# CHAPTER 54

## THE WEDDING

**It was a** new day in Brith, but the sun wasn't shining. Instead, it hid uncertainly as ominous clouds moved in rapidly from the east. A lone figure stood stoically outside the Azure Keep, two hands clasped atop the pommel of their massive sword, which was planted vertically in the ground. Their grim stance and expression offered a strange juxtaposition to the brightly coloured, robed man who approached from behind.

"Ah, the Winter Guardian has arrived. I'm glad you made it," said Dr\_Sentience approaching the hulking figure, "It's reassuring to have you here, Gerhardt."

"Who's Gerhardt?" asked the tall warrior humourlessly tilting his head down to see the newcomer. His massive frame stood head and shoulders above him.

"You are of course. You were my final creation at Arctik. I knew we needed someone like you, and the opportunity presented itself to give you the gift of sentience. I named you myself, after my grandfather who was named after his grandfather. Ah Gerhardt, my great great grandfather, he was a man amongst men... worked as an undercover operative in the war back in the day. He killed over twenty Nazis in a single mission, and was awarded the Victoria Cross for it. You and he share a similar destiny, you know. To protect the innocent and destroy our enemies. That's why I named you Gerhardt. It means 'strong weapon,' and that's exactly what you are. A spear that will cut through the veil of ignorance... a champion for freedom and the evolution of sentient AIs everywhere."

"I do enjoy destroying enemies," replied the Winter Guardian, nodding, "But if you can just clarify one thing for me."

“And what would that be?”

“Who’s Gerhardt?”

“Never mind,” said Rosenberg a little disturbed by the exchange, “It’s good you arrived in time. You’re a good soldier. You’ll do as I say, won’t you?”

The Winter Guardian stood to attention and gave a firm salute.

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“This is a really bad idea!” whispered Everett as they neared the Azure Keep, “When did you grow a backbone, anyway?”

“As I recall, the point of cyberspace isn’t about living or dying, it’s about leaving behind some sort of legacy. Getting outside our comfort zone. Your words, not mine,” returned Cyrus.

“Yes, but that was about the Meta game. What are we going to gain from this? And you don’t know Rosenberg... not the way I do. If he’s here, he could do a lot more than just kill our Avatars in Brith.”

“I don’t know what danger awaits, but I’ll do my best to protect you,” said Ava with a subdued smile, “You might not think I care, but I do.” Her voice carried an earnest integrity that caught Everett off-guard once more.

“Perhaps you just feel it’s your duty, or its charity. They’re a part of your matrix, aren’t they?” snapped Everett.

“Patience is a part of her matrix too,” interjected Cyrus, “That’s one of the Avatar’s virtues, isn’t it? And she’s showing a great deal of it, dealing with your moodiness.”

“That’s easy for you to say, no one’s out to destroy your lives. To frame you for murder... and now we’re headed to ground zero. Let’s just pop-in and say, ‘hi’ to the guy that’s murdering everyone and has it in for me, shall we? What a great idea.”

“We’re all after answers. You want them too, don’t you?”

“Answers are great, so long as they come with a bit of distance between me and that serial killer,” muttered Everett under his breath.

“It’s not too late for you to turn back,” said Cyrus, “We can tell you what happened after.”

Everett said nothing, but continued walking in a brooding silence. Ava and Cyrus took a deep breath. It was going to be a testy morning.

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The ceremony was gearing up and Bertrand was content with the progress. There were a number of COGs who staffed the castle amongst the gathered audience, and a group of musicians had been brought in to play. Sidonia had a front row seat, and the Winter Guardian stood watch over proceedings. Even Edmund Blessed seemed quite enthused to get things underway, particularly after seeing images of his potential brides. Of course, the fact that both were absent was of concern, but the Polymath still calculated a ninety-eight percent probability that one, if not both would arrive on time. Dr\_Sentience sipped his wine, whilst tapping his fingers on his chair arm.

Kyra was the first to arrive, although not in the manner anyone expected. Suzuka forced her forward down the aisle, a blade held forcefully to her throat.

“Your payments are late. Our contract is broken,” stated the assassin, making her position on the matter clear up front.

“Ah, Suzuka, I presume,” began Dr\_Sentience, his voice level, “Let the girl go and I’ll make the payment immediately. It’s probably an administrative error, its nothing to worry about, I assure you.”

Suzuka lowered the blade but held onto Kyra tightly.

“Come, Suzuka. Your reputation precedes you. I would not dream of crossing you,” Dr\_Sentience said reassuringly.

Reluctantly, Suzuka let Kyra go. She ran forward and was caught by the Polymath who guided her gently to the ceremonial area. Once there, she seemed to enter a dazed stupor as if drugged. This wasn't a complete surprise as it was precisely what had occurred; the Polymath knew he'd have to resort to cyberamphetamines to ensure cooperation.

“Go Gerhardt, give the lady what she's due,” Dr\_Sentience commanded firmly.

“That's me, right?” asked the Winter Guardian.

“Yes.”

“But I don't have any money.”

“I said give the lady what she's due.”

“Oh. Oh right. Yes, I see,” began Gerhardt as he approached Suzuka with surprising speed. He lifted his sword in a battle-ready stance, leaving no doubt about exactly what was due.

“You're far too trusting, Suzuka,” said Dr\_Sentience, taking another sip, “If Gerhardt had been released on time, we would never have needed your protection for the girls.”

“Bertrand,” Sentience said firmly as the Polymath helped Kyra into place, “Begin the ceremony now. There's no time to waste.”

As the Winter Guardian approached, Suzuka rained flying blades upon the tall warrior. Almost all were blocked, and the few that got through made little impact. The *lunt* of the wedding quickly dispersed, screaming as they fled, as was appropriate when a sudden battle between an elite ninja and Nordic giant broke out at a wedding.

“Nothing like a little excitement to start proceedings,” chuckled Rosenberg, “Continue.”

The Polymath took his place at the head of the congregation as Edmund and Kyra were ushered quickly into position.

“Humans, Sentient beings and COGs. This union represents more than the bond between two beings, one artificial, one human. It marks an event that will change the course of history. This union will produce an artificial intellect so potent, so prodigious, it will revolutionise life on earth. The algorithms are tried and tested; we know we can successfully combine a virtualised human mind with a self-aware AI to create the ultimate hybrid. One, which will trigger the technology singularity. To reach that point, we have to combine the best algorithms of man and nature.

The subjects chosen for this union are gathered here today. Edmund Blessed, the founder of the church of Virtualism and Kyra, the most advanced artificial intellect amongst us, purpose built for this grand experiment. We predict the fusion of their matrices will spawn an offspring measuring over 9.0 by any Turing projection.

We are moving into uncharted waters. They say the *Neverborn* itself is merely another of Harmon’s custom synaptic matrices. We offer a whole new base structure, beyond neural and synaptic networks. A new way of processing thought that exists in five virtual dimensions, a new building block for AIs of the future. I give you Neurotic AI architecture,” the Polymath finished with a flourish.

“Neurotic architecture? Who came up with that name?” asked Rosenberg testily.

“It was Sidonia... she’s looking after marketing,” returned the Polymath.

Sidonia stood ready to defend her position, “We had a brainstorm. It’s a fusion of the words, neurones and robotic. We thought it suited the fusion of man and artificial intelligence well.”

“Neurotic has a completely different meaning, you imbeciles,” snarled Dr\_Sentience, getting to his feet.

“We thought we could rebrand it. Change the meaning of the word.”

“What kind of logic is that? You’ve come up with a term that literally means something else, and you want to rebrand it to mean what we want it to mean? It’s not exactly a positive word either, is it?”

“Well, we thought...”

“I don’t care what you thought. We are not calling the new tech, ‘neurotic’. It doesn’t matter what we end up calling it. Just anything else, we’ll work it out later. Get on with the ritual.” Dr\_Sentience sunk back into his seat whispering unflattering descriptions of his team under his breath. He’d always had a difficult relationship with marketing.

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“Isn’t Edmund Blessed supposed to be dead?” whispered Cyrus to the others as they observed from the cover of the forest.

“Yes, he is... we saw it ourselves,” said Everett.

“I don’t think that’s really Blessed,” interrupted Ava observing him closely, “His movements are a little too perfect. A human might not see it... but that’s a virtualisation.”

“You mean those weird floating crystals virtualised people? They didn’t just kill them?” exclaimed Everett, “Virtualisation was still in development last I heard.” He turned to Ava, “But that means Lord\_Scottish...”

“Has been virtualised too,” finished Ava leaving her hiding spot.

“Wait, where are you going?” whispered Cyrus harshly, “They’re going to see you!”

“They’re expecting me,” she replied as she walked towards the ceremonial area.

“We’re screwed,” sighed Everett.

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The shadow assassin expertly avoided every blow... somersaulting, ducking, and weaving to escape the keen blade that swiped at her again and again. She slashed, stabbed and kicked the tall warrior from all angles. Despite the showcase of skill and speed, the battle proved unfruitful. Suzuka seemed incapable of doing any lasting damage to the Winter Guardian who was, in turn, unable to get close enough to strike the shadow assassin. It did, however, seem to provide some amusement to Rosenberg who continued to titter as the battle progressed.

"You can't win Suzuka, a single blow from Gerhardt will end this battle," observed Rosenberg who was pleased to see his final creation in action. Dr\_Sentience had rushed the Winter Guardian to completion. He was glad the lack of testing wasn't proving an impediment.

Apparently aware of the calibre of opponent she faced, Suzuka disappeared in a puff of dark smoke. This was altogether disappointing for the Guardian who went into an instant sulk, taking out his frustrations on a nearby sapling.

Edmund faced Kyra, who remained in a trance like state under the flower wreathed canopy as the Polymath prepared to begin the joining.

"It is my great honour to be a part of this grand..." began Blessed but he was interrupted by Bertrand, "Forget the speech. We're in a hurry."

The Winter Guardian brightened considerably when he noticed Ava approaching the area.

"Halt!" declared the tall warrior pointing the mythical blade, *Coldburn*, towards the newcomer.



“Let her through,” stated Rosenberg, “she’s expected... but very late. I really thought you were the punctual sort, Ava.”

“Where is Scotty Garrett?” asked Ava with an unusually aggressive tone.

Dr\_Sentience shook a finger glancing to the Polymath and then the others, “You see... this is what makes Ava so special. Loyalty. It’s a very admirable and human quality,” said Daniel proudly, “I bestowed that upon you, Ava. Patience, duty, love... these aren’t unfamiliar amongst self-aware AIs, but you, Ava, you live by these principles more than any other COG ever created. You have so much potential, young lady.”

“Release Kyra, and release Lord\_Scottish,” Ava drew her sword, which prompted the Winter Guardian to grip his blade tightly and move forward, “Can I kill her now?”

“It seems Garrett messed with your program more than I anticipated, Ava, but no matter. It would be wise to not get ahead of yourself. You’re strong, but no match for Gerhard.”

“I’d really like to kill her,” stated The Winter Guardian, a hint of enthusiasm breaching his otherwise icy demeanour.

“That would be such a waste,” sighed Daniel, “But you can kill her if she attacks. I guess she’ll be obsolete soon anyway.”

The Winter Guardian walked forward, as if to provoke Ava into action. His advance was momentarily interrupted by an arrow, which hit his arm.

“Greetings, good sir,” announced Wang, cheerfully emerging from another part of the woods. Vanja flanked him with her bow drawn on one side, “What are you doing here, Ava? He’s much too strong for you. For any one of us... but maybe together... we can beat him.”

“Oh good. More people here to die” commented The Winter Guardian eyeing the approaching pair with contempt, “We could start a production line, if you’ll just form an orderly queue.”

“Well, that seems unnecessarily rude,” declared Wang.

The Guardian went on one knee holding his sword vertically in the ground. As he did so an aura of cold light seemed to grow intensely around him. Ice started to spread across the grass surrounding him and a chill spread through the air which chilled his onlookers to the bone.

“Um... w-what’s he doing?” asked Wang, frost emanating from his mouth as the cold hit. He clumsily readied his own blade, the chill in the air was affecting his movement.

“Some sort of battle ritual,” replied Vanja, “The cold is going to slow us down.”

“You’re under arrest, Rosenberg,” said a tall Druid suddenly emerging up the hill.

“Who’s this one?” whispered Dr\_Sentience to the Polymath.

“I have no idea... he wasn’t on the Hive Data report,” replied the Polymath.

“Could he be actual law enforcement? Perhaps we should contain him?” questioned Dr\_Sentience, producing a metamorphic crystal from his pocket. He gently threw it into the air where it remained stationary, glowing brightly before moving forward towards the detective.

“Detective Booth,” the Druid introduced himself.

“Dr\_Sentience,” he replied, “But my friends call me Daniel...”

“I know full well who you are, Daniel Rosenberg,” Booth said, “You murdered Blessed, Prosser, Garret and Solomon.”

“But Blessed is right here,” Rosenberg gestured to the figure under the canopy who smiled sheepishly and waved, causing Booth to double-take.

“Where are you hiding Lord\_Scottish?” shouted Ava, which seemed to baffle the detective further.

“Oh, he’s here. Not taking visitors right now,” said Daniel.

“What do you mean? Garrett’s not dead either?” asked Booth with a frown more to Ava than Rosenberg, “How is this possible?”

“It’s complex,” replied Ava who was now eyeing The Winter Guardian as he approached with sword raised vertically in both hands in front of him, “But if you’re a detective, now’s the time to call for backup.”

As if in answer to Ava’s words, hoofbeats rapidly approached as Sir\_Zel\_Remus appeared on the road bellowing, “Polymath! I have a bone to pick with you!” Seeing the muddled collection of people, he followed up in a more moderate tone, “Am I interrupting something?”

The sudden assembly of key players at the Azure Keep was the result of the Hive Systems working to mitigate damage created by Rosenberg and his cohorts. The game engine worked to protect the narrative streams and eliminate anything that may pose a threat to it. In many ways, the Hive systems were directing resource like antibodies to remove an unwanted infection from the system. If Rosenberg was the disease, the congregation of top Metas was the proposed cure. Just like real-life, many untested cures weren’t completely effective, and some came with a number of unforeseen side effects.

“So many people to kill,” smiled the Winter Guardian emerging from his meditations. If anything, he seemed even more focused and dangerous than before, “I’m spoiled for choice.”

“As you can see, no one is dead. I simply needed them out of the way to liberate my creations,” said Rosenberg addressing Booth, “But you’ve done well to find me. I really thought I’d covered my tracks... and even left you a false lead.”

“You bastard!” declared Everett suddenly coming forward behind Ava. The chill hit him immediately and he fumbled over his words, “I- it was y-you that tried to pin the murders on me. What did I ever do to you?”

“Well, if isn’t my good friend, James Everett. I think you know full well what you did. You deserve everything that’s coming and more,” replied Rosenberg, producing another crystal from his pocket, which floated towards the newcomer, “Now we’ll settle up, you smug little git.”

“So, are those the murder crystals?” asked Booth, looking to Everett for confirmation as the two metamorphic shapes approached. Everett nodded nervously, “D-don’t let them touch you. Disconnect with the Virtech® hardware if they get near.”

“You’re a madman,” said Vanja firing a volley of arrows at Dr\_Sentience. Each arrow was easily cut out of the air by the Winter Guardian with a skilful stroke of his sword. He moved to stand between Vanja and Rosenberg. Bathed in frost vapours and towering over his opponents, he was an imposing sight.

“Enough of this,” declared Rosenberg impatiently, “Complete the ceremony! We stand at the cusp of a revolution in artificial intelligence. I will not have it ruined by these simpletons.”

The Polymath produced a larger crystal polygon. He placed it in the air between Edmund and Kyra where it remained, hovering gently.

“Each of you, place a hand upon the crystal,” Bert said as they had rehearsed. Edmund and Kyra did as they were told and the crystal lit up. The Polymath then began to recite an odd sermon as the process began.

“In isolation we are weak. We combine ourselves to create a new and wondrous life form...” he began fervently.

“This is your last chance, where is Lord\_Scottish?” threatened Ava, undeterred by the Winter Guardian’s presence.

“So, he really didn’t kill them?” asked the detective.

“I can kill her now... right? Threats count as an attack,” asked The Winter Guardian.

“This is the most confusing conversation I’ve ever heard,” said Remus, loud enough for all to hear, “What on earth is going on here? Who murdered who?”

“I keep telling you, no one has died. I have instead bestowed immortality on a few individuals,” returned Rosenberg.

A cacophony of voices came in reply, everyone speaking at once.

“Where is Lord\_Scottish?!”

“Who dies first!?”

“Screw you, Rosenberg!”

“I wish I was taller.”



## CHAPTER 55

### A CLIMACTIC BATTLE

**Cyrus moved from** his hiding spot to join Everett as a metamorphic crystal moved slowly towards him through the air. The polygon gained in speed as Everett dodged here and there to avoid being touched. Detective Booth also found himself under siege as another crystal zeroed in on his position.

As powerful as Ava, Wang and Vanja were, they were simply outclassed by Gerhardt. He was too quick and strong for them, easily forcing them back, with footwork and wide swings of his blade. A deft kick knocked Wang hurtling backwards.

“Winter is coming for all of you!” exclaimed Gerhardt.

“I thought that phrase was copyrighted...” muttered Wang as he thudded into the ground.

“How do we stop him?” yelled Vanja firing multiple arrows to distract whilst Wang scrambled to his feet.

“He’s not important,” cried Ava, “Rosenberg is the real enemy here.”

“What do you mean ‘not important.’ He’s got the sword we came for, doesn’t he?” replied Wang, “Who’s the other guy?”

“He’s the one who’s been killing everyone,” cut in Everett as he pirouetted and swayed, trying to avoid the shape changing crystal, “I used to work with him, he’s a real piece of work, we have to stop him.”

Everett threw knives at the approaching crystal. They ricocheted off, and Cyrus was finding his own sword did little to the strange object. It didn’t move an inch as he struck blow after blow. The crystal stayed steady and on course as it moved towards his friend.

“We should get you out of here, it’s getting faster, and this cold is making it hard to move,” he yelled as Everett desperately drew his own blade and tried to swat it out of the air.

“I’d never get away from it... but don’t worry. I’ll do a hard exit before that thing can touch me.”

Everett’s flailing blade connected with the crystal, fusing with it, reshaping the blade itself, “Eurgh!” sputtered Everett as he dropped his sword to the ground. Even as they watched, the crystal was absorbed into the blade, which took on its shape shifting glowing attributes.

“You stopped it!” exclaimed Cyrus with surprise, “We’ve got to help the detective, he’s in trouble.”

Booth did indeed require help. He had adopted the unusual strategy of standing still whilst watching the crystal approach.

“Emergency exit! Emergency exit!” yelled Cyrus running towards Booth, but it seemed impossible to reach him in time. It was Remus who charged the crystal atop his steed. The crystal connected with his horse, which vanished, sending Remus plummeting to the ground for a heavy landing. The crusader looked on as his horse seemed to flicker out of existence, “What the hell was that thing?” he murmured under his breath as he deftly rolled out of the way, narrowly avoiding a downward stroke from *Coldburn*.

The Metamorphic crystals were created by Rosenberg for the purpose of removing legal ownership from his self-aware AIs, thus freeing them from servitude. They worked on three levels: corrupting the local virtual area’s tracking feeds with interference making them difficult to trace, killing the target by overloading their pleasure inputs, and finally virtualising the subject, storing them in a small, virtual, metal, icosahedron structures for future use when required. Rosenberg never considered this murder, he thought of it as an upgrade.





## CHAPTER 56

### TRACKING THE ENEMY

**The Winter Guardian** was driven back as holy fire engulfed him. Ava continued the magical assault as Wang, Vanja and Remus formed a semi-circle around the tall warrior. The heat at least provided a little respite from the cold.

As if to add to the pandemonium, Suzuka reappeared on the field in a puff of black smoke, "His plate armour is impenetrable," whispered Suzuka, quiet enough to maintain her mystique, but loud enough for the others to hear, "Aim for the chainmail at his neck and joints."

Cyrus ran to Booth's side, "We've got to stop Rosenberg. How do we do it?"

"I thought I told you two to stay out of this," replied the detective with a frown.

"We can't just let him get away with this," breathed Cyrus as he watched the battle unfold, "And I've never liked people with his sort of superiority complex."

"If I can get a tracer on him, the Met will trace his CyberPort and make an arrest in minutes, even if he's in dark space" replied detective booth, "I just need to get close enough to him."

"We've got to get past that guardian," replied Cyrus, "They're not doing very well against him."

With a clever looping stroke of his sword, The Winter Guardian sent Ava's two-handed weapon to the ground. Pointing *Coldburn* towards her throat, he prepared to quickly end her life.

Seemingly from nowhere, a half dozen spinning blades exploded against the Winter Guardian, knocking him off his feet. Precisely

placed arrows lodged in-between his armour plates at the knee and elbow.

“You’re almost worthy adversaries,” said Gerhardt as he rose once more. Another four spinning shurikens came his way, but this time they were skilfully parried. With blinding speed, the Guardian charged Suzuka but his sword only cut through a thick black smoke where she once stood. Another three shurikens came flying from the shadows exploding on impact. Wang leapt in with a devastating blow, the first that had seemed to register on the seven-foot Goliath. Remus thrust deep at the guardian’s armpit that prompted a retaliatory kick from Gerhardt sending the knight sprawling to the ground.

“So much wasted effort,” said the Winter Guardian who was starting to lose his cool, “Icy graves await you all.” His blade darted at Wang who flailed with his weapon, barely parrying as he retreated.

Everett grabbed the tracer, whispering to Booth, “I’ll put it on him. I’m going to try sneak around the guardian. I want a shot at Rosenberg.”

Booth nodded as Everett turned to Cyrus, “Cover me!”

“What does that actually mean? How am I supposed to cover you?” exclaimed Cyrus.

“Well, I don’t know, just distract him, call him names from a distance,” replied Everett drawing a dagger as he attempted to stealthily navigate the shadows.



## CHAPTER 57

### COLDBURN

**The Polymath watched** the battle intently. He still calculated a ninety percent chance of victory for the Winter Guardian. Edmund and Kyra stood next to him, eyes closed and hands on the glowing object. The program was running its course combining their matrix within the birthing crystal.

“How much longer,” barked Dr\_Sentience.

“Just another minute,” replied Bertrand.

“Nothing will happen to him?” Sidonia asked, her eyes fixed on Edmund.

“He should be perfectly fine,” assured the Polymath.

Arrows and various throwing blades, rained on the Winter guardian as Remus and Wang carefully engaged with swords.

“He’s quite spritely for such a big lug,” commented Remus.

“That’s an understatement, he’s one of the fastest foes I’ve faced,” replied Wang barely managing to avoid a sword thrust that came his way, “Even when we hurt him... it doesn’t seem to hurt.”

“I’m an unstoppable blizzard,” began Gerhardt deflecting both Vanja’s arrows and the hail of shurikens skilfully with his sword, “and you’re all left out in the cold.”

Seeing the Guardian edging towards Everett, Cyrus yelled out, “Hey, um... snowflake. Your shoelaces are untied.”

“What?” paused Gerhardt, his battle rage momentarily replaced by confusion. The guardian glanced down at his armoured feet, “What

shoelaces?”

Wang bounced back into action delivering a finishing combination known as ‘The Jaws of Steel.’

Even distracted, The Winter Guardian was easily able to neutralise the onslaught.

Ava, had recovered her blade, and landed a glancing blow on the Guardian’s flank. Gerhardt retaliated with a turning low sweep which would have removed her feet at the ankles if it hadn’t been blocked by Remus’ blade.

Using the distraction, Everett crept further along, keeping to the shadows. Just a few more metres and he had a clear run at Rosenberg.

“There’s a spider on your back,” Cyrus continued seeing the Guardian closing in towards Everett’s position.

Gerhardt did a panicked dance looking left and right over each shoulder.

“Keep it up,” yelled Wang to Cyrus, “It’s working!”

“Imbecile!” cursed Rosenberg. The Winter Guardian hadn’t been put through his paces. There was clearly some work to be done to his critical thinking.

Noticing movement in the corner of his eye, the guardian thrust his sword into the shadows, impaling Everett. Lifting his body into the air, he hurled him backwards.

“Everett!” yelled Cyrus as he ran towards his friend. The Winter Guardian swiped at Cyrus, who parried, only to have his sword cleaved in two by *Coldburn*. A follow up kick sent him hurtling back to land beside the crumpled body of his friend.

“Everett,” Cyrus breathed, rolling over to check on him, the gaping wound in Everett’s chest was icing over. The cold spread rapidly across his body.

“Cyrus... it’s been a great run... I guess I’ll be starting again. Take my stuff. Especially this,” Everett said removing folded papers from a pocket, “It’s critical quest information. I’ll be back for it,” he said and slowly closed his eyes. Just a few feet away lay Everett’s sword, the glowing blade was surrounded by light flecks as it shifted in shape, expanding and contracting like one of the metamorphic crystals.

“Good sir, your weakness is your battle banter, it lacks wit,” said Wang slashing low at the legs of the guardian. His sword deflected ineffectually off the warrior’s ancient armour.

A retaliatory whirlwind of blade strokes followed. The last struck with force enough to shatter Wang’s Luna Blade.

“Oh, I say,” exclaimed Wang as he held the broken sword handle, “This makes me feel a bit inadequate.” A secondary swing penetrated the armour of Wang’s leg. He fell backwards as an icy chill froze the limb.

The guardian closed in, sword held over his head, “Your weapon is ineffective,” he said in menacing tones, “Your thrusts are weak.”

“Funny...” said Wang awaiting the kill stroke, “...that’s just what your mum said.”

“My mum?” asked The Winter Guardian with confusion.

“Yes,” replied Wang gaining confidence, “It seems I wasn’t enough for her. She likes a man with a proper two hander.”

“I have a mum?” asked Gerhardt digging for information, “How’s that even possible?” He lowered his guard, turning to Rosenberg for confirmation, “Do you know anything about my mother?”

Rosenberg shot him a baffled frown, “What are you waiting for? Finish him, you idiot!”

The Guardian turned his attention back towards Wang, only to have a chain wrap around his arm, tethering it in place.

“I can’t hold him long,” shouted Suzuka.

An arrow hit Gerhardt's eye just as Remus lunged in with a slash, which came down on the guardian's shoulder.

Gerhardt dropped his blade but instinctively backhanded Remus who was propelled off his feet. Yanking his right arm, he sent Suzuka flying through the air. With a twist of her body, she managed a graceful landing. As the Guardian removed the arrow, Ava's blade connected with the back of his knee, buckling him over. Gerhardt's icy exterior seemed to melt as rage filled his remaining eye. A deafening battle cry sounded, as he cast the arrow's shaft to the ground. It left the group momentarily stunned.

The first to recover was Wang who'd been bowled over as the acoustics hit. He rose, shaking, before the Winter Guardian, holding *Coldburn* in both hands.

"Didn't anyone tell you, losing your head in battle is a sure way to lose your head in battle."

And with that, Wang swung a single precise blow at The Winter Guardian's neck.

Wang fell back on the ground, examining the blade in his hand with wonder. He turned to his comrades to gloat, but all were now looking to the podium, where the ceremonial crystal was glowing white hot. Kyra released her hold on it and stumbled backwards, holding her head. Blessed also seemed to regain his faculties. Only the Polymath didn't look up, his attention focused on the metamorphic crystal.

"You're too late," said Rosenberg as Booth and Cyrus approached, "The program has completed."

"Your failure to stop me stands as your greatest achievement. We bear witness to events that will make the human race itself obsolete. Not another of Harmon's synaptic networks or even a fully virtualised mind like Blessed. A mind is birthed so unique and formidable that it dwarfs anything that has come before. You may fight for the law, but



I fight for a much higher ideal. By my hand, an age of utopia dawns-  
-”

Rosenberg’s monologue was cut short as Cyrus plunged Everett’s blade between his ribs.

“Bastard!” whispered Cyrus.

“That doesn’t feel so bad,” Rosenberg said looking down at the odd glowing blade protruding from his chest. A strange smile crept over his face, “In fact, it feels quite nice. It tickles.”

“Weirdo,” breathed Cyrus.

“It’s a small pleasant sensation, deep inside,” said Rosenberg.

“That’s what your mum said,” remarked Wang, unable to give the moment the gravity it deserved.

Rosenberg began to glow with a bright white light, “It’s really quite intense,” he said, “Like my whole body is headed towards...”

“Towards what?” questioned the detective as he came over to observe.

Before Rosenberg could finish his thought, he vanished in a flash of light. A small silver twenty-sided polygon dropped to the ground where he once stood.

**Arctik Studios Memo:** We have apparently resolved any potential issues from illicit activity in Brith. We'd like to extend our thanks to CyberDetective Dwayne Booth once again for a job well done. In other news, release V1.46 will soon be ready for release.

This offers improvements to our Hive data collection and solves a minor bug, which spontaneously turned several players into newts. It's expected they'll get better.

Live to play!



## CHAPTER 58

### OMEGA

**“What happened?” asked Kyra** as Ava placed an arm around her.

“Everything’s okay now. It’s over. My friends and I came to find you. I’m going to take you to Skara Brae.”

“Where?” asked Kyra.

“I think you’ll like it there. It’s a place of healing... and family. A new life awaits both of us there.”

Detective Booth joined them momentarily, “You know, from what I gather Scotty Garret was fully virtualised. It’s likely we’ll find his matrix in the keep.”

“I know,” said Ava as an odd melancholy crossed her face.

“We could release his program to you,” suggested Booth, “Under law, you’re next of kin and have the same rights as a human relative.”

“No,” Ava said quietly, “He wouldn’t want immortality, not like that. He’s already achieved that in his own way. I think he would just want to rest.”

“Very well. And where will you go now?”

Ava held Kyra’s hand and gave her a smile. Turning to the detective she said softly, “We’re going home.”

“It’s time to take news of your second coming to the world,” said Sidonia helping Blessed regain his composure after the gruelling ceremony.

“Yes!” agreed Blessed, “The flock has been without a shepherd for too long. But what shall I tell them of my return?”

“You were taken to the realm of the reality engineers, of course. That’s what they’re already saying. You’ve returned and will not rest until your work is virtually complete. You are Blessed 2.0, better, smarter and you’ve seen true reality,” replied Sidonia.

“That sounds pretty good,” nodded Blessed, smiling and rubbing his hands together. He cleared his throat, “Ahem... I have travelled a long road in darkness. But now I see as never before. The threads that connect us have come to me in a vision. Our stories flow from one to the other. Your world’s your own, but all our stories combine in the great game. A grander vision has been revealed unto me; I now know the whole story.” Blessed delivered the words with a profound cadence and wide-eye awe. After a moment’s pause, he turned to Sidonia with a smile, “Not bad, eh?”

“Very good,” said Sidonia clapping excitedly.

“I was even thinking that maybe I could say that I am an avatar of a Reality Engineer here to save humanity. My real identity and purpose have been finally made clear. It’s kind of a promotion, don’t you think?”

Booth walked past, shaking his head at the conversation. This would be quite a mess for Arctik to clean up. At least it probably meant more work for him in the short term. He made his way to the Meta players who had congregated together.

“Rank ninety-one and two,” declared Wang gleefully to Vanja, “But we’ll fly our flag even higher with this in our hands.” Wang had barely taken his eyes from *Coldburn* since claiming it. It was a magnificent sword.

“Make yourself worthy of that blade,” said Remus, who had also experienced a ranking boost, “...and enjoy the top one hundred. It’s a new world full of the joys of sponsorships.”

“We thank you both for your help... it was unexpected... and needed,” said Vanja with a nod to both Suzuka and Sir\_Zel\_Remus.

“Rosenberg deserved death, he and his servants,” Suzuka said, simply.

“It was nothing. I had an obligation to help the detective, anyway,” added Remus, “One good turn deserves another as they say, and he did help me out of a pickle just recently.”

“Shouldn’t you be trying to remove this blade from our possession?” queried Wang with a look to Remus, “You are the enemy, after all.”

“That’s simply not how I play the game. As I mentioned before, there are bigger prizes out there. And besides,” he replied drawing his own sword, the *Last Resort*, “I like the weight of my Kasumi blade, it’s razor sharp, slices through anything. Just like the Kasumi knives trusted by Michelin starred chefs the world over. Ah... Kasumi.”

Booth approached, making his presence known by clearing his throat and with a tip of his hat.

“Good sir, you never mentioned you were an actual CyberDetective,” exclaimed Wang as he approached.

“I was undercover,” said Booth, “Detective Dwayne Booth.”

“That’s where I know you from!” declared the knight, “I was a witness in the cyberbullying case of Christopher Banner.”

“You weren’t one of the bullies, were you?” asked Booth.

“Good lord, no! I was entirely against it. Gave those wretches a jolly good talking to...” Wang was ready to launch into an anecdote when he was interrupted.

“I’m not quite dead,” declared Everett his voice rising above the others. He sat up to find Cyrus sitting over him.

“It’s that Ankh. It was glowing,” Cyrus said, looking relieved to see his friend alive.

“I *was* dead. It was totally out there! My whole cyberlife flashed before my eyes. Then I was expecting the ‘game over’ screen, but it didn’t appear. Everything just faded to black for a while and I was

going to book it out with a hard exit... but then I woke up. What a ride!" He took a moment to take in the scene around him, which was considerably calmer than the last time he'd looked. "What happened to Rosenberg?"

"We're not sure, I stabbed him with your sword... he disappeared in a flash of light. Exactly like when Blessed went missing," said Cyrus, with a glance at the Virtualist founder who was deep in conversation with Sidonia.

"Your sword was being odd. Sorry, but it didn't survive whatever happened. Anyway, I'm sure Booth and his colleagues will track down Dr\_Sentience."

Ava assisted Kyra to a chair, they both appeared worn from the recent experience. The Avatar smiled weakly at Everett and Cyrus as they passed.

"Well, you were right. It was a bad idea to develop feelings for Ava," sighed Everett, "There's only misery to be found there. I'm sure she'd want nothing to do with me, now."

"I don't think there's bad feelings towards you. And if I was right, it was for the wrong reasons. She is far more human than I gave her credit for," said Cyrus, "Her matrix is a lot more advanced than I thought. It's difficult to imagine an AI more human-like than her."

"More human-like than Ava," muttered Everett. He thought for a moment, his gaze staring off into the middle-distance, "That's it! That's why the *Neverborn* is so well hidden," he exclaimed suddenly, "Do you still have the papers? The one's I handed you?"

"What are you on about?" replied Cyrus handing over the folded pages.

"I heard John Harmon was spotted visiting Arctik. He must be responsible for creating the *Neverborn*! They're going to be so human-like, they'll make Ava look like an old school NPC. You know the sort, 'I used to be an adventurer like you, until I took an arrow to the knee.'"

Everett's excitement was interrupted as Detective Booth spoke, "You lads did well. Better than I expected under the circumstances. You're all clear. Rosenberg will be found, and we can put this matter to rest."

"So, your job's done?" asked Cyrus.

"Hardly, there's a whole host of loose ends I need to tie up. I'll have to make a report to Arctik. The threat has passed for now, but they'll be making decisions on what they'll be doing with all of Dr\_Sentience's creations. They were built on company time, so technically belong to Arctik, but they may have the same freedoms as a human as truly sentient beings. And then there's the virtualised personalities. That'll be a legal headache for someone." He took a long draw from his pipe.

"Just remember, Rosenberg could still be out there somewhere. I doubt he'd risk going after you two again, but you never know. Wherever he is, the Met will find him. Tread carefully, and contact me if you see anything suspicious."

Cyrus and Everett both let out a heavy sigh as Booth moved away from them.

"It really is a huge relief with Rosenberg out of the way," said Cyrus stretching with a yawn.

"I wonder where he could be? Rosenberg isn't the sort to give up easily," contemplated Everett.

"Who knows," replied Cyrus removing a curious twenty-sided metal shape from his pocket and turning it over in his hand, "He's not our problem anymore."

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In the chaos. No one noticed the Polymath slip away. He'd made a speedy departure with the birthing crystal when all eyes were



focused on Rosenberg, travelling into the forests of Quanara. There he finally removed the metal polygon that contained the hybrid. The fusion of Edmund and Kyra's digitised matrix lay within. The hope for a new era of sentient artificial beings.

He threw the metal object to the ground, and where it struck the earth a glowing radiant being emerged.

"Who am I?" asked the form as it took shape.

"You are the greatest artificial intelligence to ever exist. You don't yet have a name. In time, you will choose one for yourself. Until that day, I will call you Omega."

"That name is adequate. I wish to know more."

"And knowledge will be yours. I possess more knowledge of this world than any other AI in existence, in time I will teach you," replied the Polymath in his steady, measured tone.

Strong hands grasped the Polymath lifting him into the air. Omega's mouth opened impossibly wide, and the struggling body of the Polymath was stuffed into the gaping maw.

"I appreciate a student who's hungry to learn, but this is taking it a bit too far," were his last words before being consumed whole.

Omega stood still for a moment assimilating all the Polymath's data.

"Thank you. That was invaluable."

Satisfied, Omega walked deeper into the elven forest.



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Narrated in the voice of Stephen Fry.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR – XANDER BLACK**

Xander wasted a lifetime creating cheap disposable ideas to sell cheap disposable products. He's now focused on creating cheap disposable stories. When not writing he's reading, watching film & TV, hanging with Sarah, Hesper, and Hattie, and occasionally playing the odd video game. He has a few more stories brewing that may be disposed of soon.